Liu Qingge and the Horrible, Terrible, No Good, Very Bad Transmigration

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/53076442.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	人渣反派自救系统 - 墨香铜臭 | The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Relationships:	Liu Qingge/Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe/Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Mobei-jun/Shang Qinghua
Characters:	Liu Qingge, Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe, Shang Qinghua, Mobei-jun
Additional Tags:	Fluff, Out of Character, Eventual Smut, Modern Era, Transmigration, reverse transmigration, Gay denial, Forced Proximity, Sexual Tension, Enemies to Lovers, Angst, Shen Yuan is a loser, Doinks (affectionate), slow burn but not really, Dual POV, Swearing, Smut, slight dubcon, links for art in some chapters :D
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-16 Completed: 2024-05-04 Words: 92,134 Chapters: 30/30

Liu Qingge and the Horrible, Terrible, No Good, Very Bad Transmigration

by SenpaiBuckwheat

Summary

Dear Airplane,

I don't know what kind of sick trick this is, but one of your devoted cosplayers has staged an attempted suicide to get my attention. From the goodness and kindness of my own heart, I took this poor soul into my home to nurse their wounds only for this fucking Liu Qingge cosplayer to pull out a perfect replica of Cheng Luan and hold it against my throat! This person is absolutely convinced they are your beloved Peak Lord of Bai Zhan. Even now, he sits in my apartment, "meditating". The only reason I do nothing is because I fear for my own life!

Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it! Do you want money? An apology? Say the word, but just get this fucking lunatic away from me or I'll sic the cops on you! My blood is on your hands, Airplane. Call off your fanatic dog!

Worst regards,
Peerless Cucumber

Notes

For J, who got me into this fucking series and who tells me when Liu Qingge is being too out of character.

Chapter 1: Blossom

Cultivation in and of itself was a practice Liu Qingge was proud to indulge in. The rippling feeling of qi coursing through his veins was electric, the power inside motivating every breath in his lungs, spreading to the tips of his fingers.

Or that's how cultivating would *usually* go.

Even with his eyes closed, his temple throbbed in anticipation of the chaos and war the lovers' union would inevitably bring. Despite all the events that occurred, the human realm still churned with rage and confusion at the idea that someone so respected could marry someone so vile. Liu Qingge couldn't help but agree. A harmonious marriage between a Peak Lord and an overpowered half-blood would have, in an ideal world, brought some peace and quiet between the two groups, but it was looking increasingly unlikely.

Most of all, it was humiliating. People held the cultivators to such a high standard. What would the other sects think at this disgusting display?

Shen Qingqiu. The idiot.

Pushing one's star disciple into an abyss for three long years, then marrying him. It made no damn sense. Then he was outed as someone who helped demons and got to keep his job? Absurd. Unreasonable.

Shen Qingqiu drunkenly admitted to the events during the Immortal Alliance Conference during his and Luo Binghe's own wedding ceremony, pulling Liu Qingge aside after swigging from a few different bottles of alcohol. At that point, Shen Qingqiu was barely making sense, so Liu Qingge took his words with a grain of salt.

Being at the ceremony was painful enough, watching Luo Binghe hang on his husband's every word, touch, and glance. The affectionate smiles and gentle teasing as Luo Binghe called out for his shizun.

The *head pats*.

Liu Qingge straightened his posture and swallowed his rising bile.

He couldn't say no to attending, not after all the Peak Lords had been invited. Liu Qingge distinctly remembered Ning Yingying's incessant begging for a ceremony at the sect upon discovering that Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe had married in secret.

His memories echoed with Shen Qingqiu's stifled laughter behind his fan. The sound he made after he pushed him into that chilly pool of rose petals. The smirk on his lips.

Focus, he chided himself.

This was not the type of cultivation that brought strength and wisdom. If he kept this up, he would be curled up in a ball on the ground, attempting to still his pounding heart. Or he would be overturning the mountain in jealousy.

Now those smirks and that laughter were no longer his to keep. Even if he did hear it again, it would be the same as swallowing buckets of demon blood, writhing and thrashing around his insides.

He'd *rather* swallow demon blood than be subjected to witnessing that revolting exhibit.

Forget it. No peaceful state would be achieved at this rate. With his mind occupied by thoughts of the newlyweds Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe, only fury bubbled to the surface.

In a seamless action, Cheng Luan was drawn from its sheath, a powerful arc of qi slicing a hundred of the mountain's trees in half. The forest rumbled with falling wood and the screech of disturbed crows.

The burst of spiritual energy did nothing to calm him. Qi deviation seemed on the horizon with the amount of distress and aggressive passion roaring in his chest. If he released it, the whole mountain could crumble, bringing those goddamn newlyweds down with it. If he suppressed the qi, Liu Qingge felt he would spontaneously combust. Either way, it would result in deviation, requiring a long period of rest.

He opted for shooting a pillar of qi into the sky, watching it pierce through the mountain's fog. It warmed him for a moment.

But Liu Qingge's pounding headache quickly returned. How pathetic. He had more mental fortitude than this. Fawning and pining over a married man. An absolutely insufferable married man.

In his self-deprecated state, he dropped to the ground, feeling the prick of pine needles and the dampness of moss press against his skin. If a disciple found him like this, he'd climb to the very top of the peak and leap right off.

He closed his eyes. For the length of a breath, his mind quieted.

Until he felt the dig of an uneven lump in his spine. Irritated, he sat up, investigating the disrupter of his momentary peace.

It was a plant with luscious leaves, the deepest and richest green. The enticing blossom in the center radiated spiritual energy, calling out to him. Before he sat on it, it must've been quite a beauty. The semi-flattened petals were the colours of a fading sunset, dusty pink and lavender.

But what did it do? What was its purpose?

Unfortunately, he knew just the person to consult about such matters.

Riding on Cheng Luan, it took very little time to arrive at Qing Jing Peak from Bai Zhan. The disciples there greeted him grudgingly, in a disgraceful fashion. For a peak that prided

themselves on knowledge and the arts, they sure did a poor job at being accommodating.

He was escorted to Shen Qingqiu's quarters. Inside, he could hear the gentle voice of the Peak Lord and the less-gentle rumble of his most beloved former-disciple and present husband.

The door swished open.

Shen Qingqiu and the demon-boy were standing side-by-side as if caught in the act of something indecent. Liu Qingge didn't want to know.

"Liu-shidi," Shen Qingqiu gestured with his closed fan to invite him inside. "Sit."

Liu Qingge did as he was told, glaring at Luo Binghe with no subtlety. For a moment, the boy's eyes burned before he caught the gaze of his beloved Shizun again.

"Binghe," All Shen Qingqiu had to do was send a single glance to his husband to have 100% of the boy's attention on him. "Leave these two masters to talk."

"Shizun~" Luo Binghe whined, twisting his body back and forth. "Can't this disciple stay?" He dared to tug on the hem of his husband's sleeve.

Liu Qingge felt like he would vomit.

Shen Qingqiu's smile crept up his lips before he could hide it with his fan in time. "This master needs to conduct business with Liu-shidi. Go wait outside."

Luo Binghe made a great show of pouting his lips and reluctantly dragging his feet out the door. It slid shut, but his shadow stayed crouched just behind. He must've thought he couldn't be seen in this position.

"That is the best we will get." Shen Qingqiu waved his fan delicately. "What brings you to Qing Jing, Shidi?"

The lilt in Shen Qingqiu's voice turned Liu Qingge's stomach into a heaping pile of writhing snakes. He cleared his throat. "I have found something in Bai Zhan that may be of interest." He carefully removed the flower from his pocket and placed it on the center of the table. "It is radiating with qi. I wish you to identify it."

Shen Qingqiu made an odd expression, like he had smelled something rotten. He recovered before the emotion could be fully understood. "The Thousand-Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire," he determined extraordinarily quickly. "It does exactly as it's named. Once consumed, one's deepest wishes will be granted."

How dramatic. "You should keep it," he hmphed. "Such an item does not interest me."

The Qing Jin Peak Lord's eyes glittered with mischief. "I already have everything I could ever wish for."

Ugh.

“Shidi should keep it,” he continued. “It’s a rare opportunity.”

Who was he to refuse him? The question was… what did Liu Qingge desire the most? A single image flashed like lightning behind his eyes, but he willed it away before it could come into focus.

What a joke.

Liu Qingge returned to his residence with the utmost efficiency, the bent petals of the blossom brushing against his palms. He passed some chattering disciples before ducking inside to safety.

The plant sat undying on the shelf beside his bed for three days. Occasionally, he forgot about it, too devoted to his cultivation and honing his techniques with Cheng Luan to spare it a thought.

But before bed, he would stare at the unwilting petals before sneering and lying down. The qi hummed and buzzed in his ears, he felt it swirling in his chest. Maybe it was dangerous to have it so near for an extended period of time, but Shen Qinqiu insisted it was something that would only come into effect once consumed.

And so it went on.

He was perfectly content with his role as Peak Lord of Bai Zhan. There was nothing else he could have wanted. And yet Shen Qingqiu persisted that Liu Qingge should take it. That maybe one day he would find use for it.

But patience was not one of Liu Qingge’s virtues. The day had come now. So what if he didn’t know what he wanted most? Maybe the flower would enlighten him.

Before he could devote another thought to it, Liu Qingge ripped off the petals one by one and shoved them in his mouth. He ground his teeth against the plant and swallowed it.

It sat in his stomach with underwhelming finality.

There. What was the worst that could happen?

Chapter 2: Transmigration

Chapter Notes

no notes, just smooooooooth brain

Liu Qingge was disciplined enough to not feel discomfort over a solid bed. Many a night as a disciple he slept on the cold ground in the mountains to acclimatize his body and become immune to the ache. It was something he prided himself on. While other disciples whined and complained, Liu Qingge was one of the first to endure it in training.

This was different.

For one, the carefully-maintained temperature in his house was dysregulated. In his sleep, he furrowed his brows, shifting slightly. It was significantly cooler, yet the sun shone on his face.

Liu Qingge was meticulous when it came to his sleep patterns. As Peak Lord, he had luxuries his disciples didn't. Gauzy curtains drawn, total security from the outside world. Incense burned for some time after he fell asleep, and when he woke, the smell often lingered.

So why the inconsistencies?

It smelled of rotting fruit and something burning, stinging his nostrils.

And why was it so incredibly loud?

For a moment, the incessant rumbling and roaring made Liu Qingge fear a demon attack on Bai Zhan Peak. However, if such an attack were occurring, why had no one alerted him? Where were the sounds of panicked disciples calling for their shizun?

Liu Qingge groaned, body stiff. Did the blossom do this? His memories were patchy and hazy, like the mountain's fog clouded his brain. He vaguely remembered stumbling to his bed some time after consuming the blossom's petals. Then he slept.

It took an extraordinary amount of energy to peel an eyelid open.

But he did not see the uniform wooden slats of his home that usually greeted him upon waking. Instead, there was a wide expanse of treeless sky, occupied by towering structures of rock and shiny metal.

The dream realm , he decided. *It has to be . Where else could such a structure exist if not in the creativity of his own mind?*

But a stranger walked past, peering down curiously at him. The features weren't that of a dream state, muddled and indistinct. There was a defined nose, two eyes with depth, an uncertain frown. When had the dream realm worked so diligently to place features on every passerby? This wasn't a face he knew.

Ah, but that was the challenge with the dream realm. It was nearly indistinguishable from reality.

Fine. He would play these mind games.

Liu Qingge stood, brushing off his robes. People continued to stare, but he didn't bother to return the glances. What was the point, after all?

The surroundings were shockingly unfamiliar. There were no mountains in sight, and it certainly wasn't anywhere he had been before. The structures surrounded him on every side, looming like they themselves were demons. For all Liu Qingge knew, they could've been.

Though his heart was pounding, he continued along the level path. Metal beasts roared along the road beside him, kicking up dust. No, not beasts. Liu Qingge observed closer. Inside these carriages were people, somehow being taken from one place to the next. But where were the horses? Was there some kind of flying-sword component that made it possible? Then why were they limited to the ground?

This dream world was full of mysteries.

"Excuse me," a giggly, girlish voice chirped behind him.

Liu Qingge turned around to face the speaker. A young woman in a revealing top and tight trousers gazed up at him expectantly. Her friend seemed to match her age, her hair coloured a vibrant pink and cut short.

"I love your costume; can we take a photo with you?" The other said.

His nose crinkled. *Costume* ? This was no costume. And who were they to address a Peak Lord in such a disrespectful tone, with no formality markers? "No," he hmphed and turned on his heel to walk away.

The realm got stranger and stranger. Lights flashed in shops, on the streets, in peoples' hands. There were no smells of nature or farmland; even in the biggest cities not too far from Bai Zhan Peak, the city was connected to nature somehow. It was simpler.

He caught a glimpse of something familiar, something he could ground himself with. A small forest, across the road. All he needed to do was avoid the carriages and he would make it safely. Maybe there he could rest and determine how to escape this strange mix between a nightmare and a curious dream.

Liu Qingge weaved his way through the carriages, ignoring, but growing irritated at the war-horn-like sounds that blared from them. He stopped to glare at one, but the metal carriage

didn't stop hurtling towards him. It was larger and taller than the others. If he were a regular human, the impact of it would fatally wound him, possibly even kill him.

The Peak Lord scoffed. He drew Cheng Luan, only to notice the lack of qi buzzing from its hilt. That was strange… Maybe it was the qi deviation catching up to him…

"Hey--! Idiot!"

Liu Qingge took his eyes from the rapidly approaching beast to find the owner of the voice. How dare they call him—

Someone blurred towards him and tackled him to the other side of the road. His shoulder blades scraped against the hard rock, earning a wince. His body seemed to seize momentarily from exertion and protection against the fall, but it didn't stop the pain from quickly radiating into his hips and the back of his skull. Did he hit his head…?

There was a solid pressure on his chest, heavy and warm. Hair that wasn't his own tickled against Liu Qingge's forehead. He groaned, breath stuttering back to his lungs.

When his scrunched eyes snapped open, he stared into the panicked gaze of a young man. He had a thin face with a pointy chin, and—

"What the *fuck* were you thinking?" The tackler scrambled off Liu Qingge, but not before jabbing a finger in his chest. "Jumping in front of traffic like that?"

This kind of language! From a scrawny nobody! This pathetic-looking boy was not worth his time. Liu Qingge stood, blinking back a confusing wave of nausea.

"Hey…" the boy said, softer. "Are you okay? You're bleeding."

Of course he was alright. As a Peak Lord, he'd endured far worse before and will endure far worse when he woke up. Despite knowing this, he followed the kid's line of sight and touched his temples. When he brought his fingers down to inspect, sure enough, he saw fresh blood. How foolish, such a small injury wouldn't phase even the youngest of his disciples. "It's nothing."

The man, a sickly-looking creature, wrapped his bony fingers around Liu Qingge's arm, tugging him away from the area. "I don't care," he said sternly. "You're obviously in the middle of some episode. My apartment is right around the corner, so we can get you cleaned up there."

Liu Qingge had little choice unless he wanted to make a scene, or risk further damaging his mind by agitating this hallucination. He shrugged off the grip, but followed anyway.

"It's a good thing I went to grab some noodles at 7-Eleven, or else I wouldn't have run into you. You'd be roadkill if someone didn't jump in to rescue you! What a stupid thing to do, crossing the road without looking twice…" The stranger continued to babble in circles.

It was irrelevant, so Liu Qingge took in his surroundings. The metal structures never ceased. The carriages continued to roar down the smooth road, and people continued to stare, their

defined features atypical to the usual dreamscape. It was something Liu Qingge would have to research upon waking up.

True to the stranger's word, they entered one of the tall buildings. Icy air blasted into Liu Qingge's face so aggressively, he momentarily feared he was being attacked. The gust calmed the further they walked into the building, but the chill remained.

"Elevator or stairs?" The man pushed his frames up the bridge of his nose. "Oh, fuck, you got blood on your costume. Elevator it is."

They waited in the hallway in silence. The ceilings were tall, the floors a shiny, polished stone. There must have been a musical group performing somewhere with the quiet music echoing in the space.

A bell rang, and the man stepped inside a metal box.

Liu Qingge furrowed his brow. This was something that made no logical sense. How would a box such as this transport them to the man's abode? He didn't like not knowing things.

"Are you coming? You're not fit for the stairs."

Liu Qingge sniffed. He was *perfectly* fit for the stairs.

But he was pulled inside before the doors shuttered closed.

The box shifted slightly, but otherwise felt stationary. "I'm on the fourteenth floor. It will take a bit." Liu Qingge felt the stranger glance at him. "I'm Shen Yuan, by the way."

"Shen Yuan." Liu Qingge let the name sit on his tongue. Why was the name so significant in this dream? "I am Liu Qingge."

Shen Yuan barked out a laugh that left Liu Qingge feeling affronted. "What's so funny?" He asks, the words nearly a hiss.

"Nothing, I'm laughing at my own misfortune."

"Hm." That wasn't an answer.

"At least you're in character. You're going to *love* my apartment, then."

The doors to the box opened. Astonishingly, they had moved.

Shen Yuan stepped out. "We're here."

Chapter 3: Merchandise

Chapter Notes

> I asked J what I should write for the notes at the beginning and I guess I don't have to write anything at all but they said I should write what I was thinking while writing the chapter and I said literally nothing, I'm surprised my brain wasn't oozing out of my ears, and then they said "thinking of me <3" so this is for J who constantly runs amok in this head of mine

No amount of cultivation could have prepared Liu Qingge for his first appearance of Shen Yuan’s apartment.

At first it was grand and spacious. Untidy was an understatement, but the space rivalled his own quarters as Peak Lord. Who was this bony brat who acquired such a state of living? A prince? The space hosted four large rooms.

The first appeared to be a kitchen, but there were no fire pits or wood stacks to verify. Instead, it was sleek and polished, aside from the variety of pots and pans filling the wash basin and scattered across the countertops.

The second was a living space with a long, squishy lounge bench and a lowered wooden table in front of it. The table was littered with bowls, cups, and colourful bags that must’ve once held food. It…didn’t smell excellent. Liu Qingge turned up his nose at the sight.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan laughed nervously, scooping the contents of the table and moving it to the kitchen, further adding to the counter’s contents. “I don’t always live like this.”

Liu Qingge had a hard time believing that.

While Shen Yuan scrambled to attempt to make his living space appropriate for guests, Liu Qingge surveyed the rest.

The third room held the chamber pot , an odd-looking thing, fashioned more like a ceramic seat than like anything Liu Qingge had ever seen before. Although the man spoke Chinese, perhaps it was a cultural difference. Besides, anything was possible in the dream realm. The rest of the relieving area was cleaner than the other rooms, but only by a small margin.

The last room was a closed door. If he didn’t pick a fight with the host of the quarters, Liu Qingge’s own mind was safe from a mental attack. If, perchance, opening the door sparked a clash with the host, Liu Qingge was far from worried. What could a puny person like Shen Yuan do to the carefully cultivated mental fortitude of a Peak Lord like Liu Qingge? The idea all but made him laugh.

He turned the knob and stepped inside.

While the other rooms were scarcely decorated, this room had considerably more to offer. Shen Yuan's bed was consistent to the rest of his abode: messy and unmade. Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. This was getting absurd. A man with obviously a significant amount of money couldn't bother to hire a cleaner?

There was a desk in the corner, again cluttered with debris, but what really drew Liu Qingge's attention was the glowing box situated on top of the desk. It was like nothing he had ever seen before. Perhaps he could write about and sell his discoveries for a fortune once he woke from this dream.

Small figurines lined two bookshelves against the wall more than books did. There were a few with colourful spines, but they seemed thin and uninformative. The shelves were probably the most organized furniture in Shen Yuan's whole quarters. How mortifying.

Shen Yuan squawked in alarm. "Walking into someone's room is a bit rude, don't you think--?!" He stumbled into Liu Qingge's back, but the Peak Lord was so strong he didn't so much as step an inch forward.

Wait. The shelves.

The figurines on the bookshelves… Liu Qingge knew these people.

Of all the things Liu Qingge's imagination had conjured for this dream, the statues on the bookshelves were the most fucked up. He pushed further into the room to investigate.

"Oh, these?" Shen Yuan calmed down, standing beside Liu Qingge to scrutinize the figures. He was tiny, the top of his fluffy hair barely reaching under Liu Qingge's chin. "These are special edition which is probably why you've never seen them before. I had to wait six hours in line to—"

"This is Luo Binghe." The words fell from Liu Qingge's mouth without permission. His careful mask of elegance and superiority fell in an instant.

The resemblance wasn't great, but who else could it have been? The blood red demon mark sat underneath his hair, which had nowhere near the volume and curls the Luo Binghe he knew had. His lips were curled into a grin.

He could *feel* Shen Yuan's eye roll. "We get it, you're Liu Qingge, you can drop the act now."

"Excuse me?" Liu Qingge chided, definitely noting the sarcasm dripping from Shen Yuan's voice. Even with that disgraceful tone, he continued to eye the figurines.

There.

"Shen Qingqiu…" It looked nothing like him, of course, but the sharp, splayed fan and colour of his robes was unmistakable. No, Shen Qingqiu had longer, softer hair, a gentler brow. Liu Qingge quickly scanned the shelves for more statues of Shen Qingqiu, but found only one more.

It was of the two of them, Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe, not wrapped in a passionate embrace as he often saw them, but a dramatic retelling of Luo Binghe's descent into the demon world's abyss. Shen Qingqiu's sword tip lay buried in Luo Binghe's chest. The fake tears in Luo Binghe's eyes told the story of a deep betrayal.

That was extremely odd… Very few people knew of this moment. Liu Qingge himself was only told not too long ago. How could this Shen Yuan have acquired such a portrait of this hidden event? Was he involved somehow?

"I was so fucking mad when I read that part," Shen Yuan said, pointing to the figures.

Read … Where had this story been told? So many unanswered questions. Was Luo Binghe tormenting Liu Qingge with this bizarre dream?

The rest of the statues were Luo Binghe in various positions, chronicling him from a young disciple to the demon lord he currently was.

He straightened from his hunched position, unnerved. The whole scenario was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. The dream was nothing he had experienced before, and quite frankly, nothing he wanted to experience ever again. Liu Qingge's temple throbbed. "Where did you read such a story?"

"Thank *god* they haven't been published as physical copies yet, so I just read them online. Honestly, they were shit, but Luo Binghe was kind of cute. And the figurines I tried to get secondhand, except for the abyss scene one, because that one was highly coveted—"

He stopped listening.

Books, now ? From Liu Qingge's knowledge, which he had a lot of, there were no books about the tale of Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe. Songs, yes, but not books. The other thing Shen Yuan mentioned—on line—was something Liu Qingge didn't understand. Some kind of regional slang?

His eyes accidentally landed on an odd statue of Luo Binghe. The only way he could tell it was the half-demon was because of the mark on his forehead. Other than that, there were no defining characteristics because he *wasn't wearing clothes* .

This was---

Disgraceful!

Liu Qingge hurried out of the bedroom, the pounding in his head growing tenfold. He sat on the squishy lounge chair, practically kicking his legs in the air when he sunk into it. Why was it so soft?

"Oh, right." Shen Yuan padded to the room with the chamber pot, returning with transparent bottles and small pieces of paper, among other things. He dumped them onto the table in front of the lounge chair. "Let's get you cleaned up before you bleed out all over my couch."

Another word he didn't know. Liu Qingge wasn't stupid, but he was beginning to feel like a child learning everything for the first time. How much of this was worth remembering?

"So, who made your costume? Did you make it yourself?" Shen Yuan doused a small cloth in alcohol from one of the bottles. The bottles were again made from a foreign substance.

And *again* with the 'costume' business. "No," he grunted. Shen Yuan dabbed gently at the cut on his head, the fabric of the cloth so light it almost tickled. "It was tailored."

Shen Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Damn. You're very dedicated to the Liu Qingge character despite him having little to no lines in the series." He tossed the cloth crusted with dark brown blood on the table, then soaked another.

"I am no *character* ," Liu Qingge hissed. He was tired of talking about himself like he wasn't present.

The cloth cleaning the cut ceased. From the corner of his eye, Liu Qingge saw Shen Yuan blanch.

"Oh my god." Shen Yuan whispered. "You really *do* have brain damage!" He stood from the 'couch', beginning to pace. "Fuck, I should've minded my own fucking business and never crossed the fucking street! Now I didn't call the fucking ambulance, and this fucking weirdo is going to die on my fucking living room floor, and I'll have to live with the guilt for the rest of my fucking life, and my parents will *kill* me, and how am I going to dispose of a fucking corpse—!?"

Liu Qingge didn't plan on dying anytime soon. A cut to the back of his head wasn't going to kill him. When he woke up, the cut wouldn't even be there. Maybe dying in this dream would be faster than waiting for his host to snap out of his delusions. Besides, listening to the sheer amount of crass language spewing from Shen Yuan's mouth was enough to kill Liu Qingge on the spot. Never had he heard those words spoken in such quick succession to the other.

"I will surely wake from this dream soon." He said, more to calm himself than Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan scrambled to his knees in front of him. The sight was the most familiar thing in this entire environment. Liu Qingge felt briefly at home with a reminder of his disciples doing the same. "Tell me," Shen Yuan pleaded. "What is your name?"

"Liu Qingge."

The man squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "No, what's your *real* name?" He sounded increasingly more panicked, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the cushions of the 'couch' beside Liu Qingge's knees.

Liu Qingge tongued his cheek in annoyance. "My name is Liu Qingge, Peak Lord and War God of Bai Zhan Peak in the Cang Qiong Mountains. I am in possession of Cheng Luan." His hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

In a flash, he stood from his seat, unsheathing Cheng Luan and placing the tip under Shen Yuan's chin. "Now tell me—"

Shen Yuan squeaked and stammered, sweat beading on his forehead, but didn't dare move.

"—Where exactly am I?"

Chapter 4: Meditation

Chapter Notes

> Welcome to the first chapter that proves this is dual POV! I wasn't lying! When I switch POVs for chapters I won't label them as such, so just guess?

"Where exactly am I?"

Delusional. He was delusional.

But with a *very very real-looking* blade against Shen Yuan's chin, he had no choice but to comply. As pathetic as his life was, he did want to live another day. The sword, Cheng Luan, as 'Liu Qingge' had claimed, was shiny and *very very sharp* . If he flinched, the tip would poke into his delicate throat.

Well, time to grovel. He willed his hands to stop trembling. "Y-you're in China. This is China." He swallowed, his Adam's apple scraping ever-so-slightly against the pointed tip. *This guy is a psychopath!* "The year is 202X, and I promise, I *promise* I will not report you to the police if you take the *fucking sword away from my throat!* "

The cosplayer sneered at Shen Yuan's embarrassing display, but his brow furrowed. "202X…" 'Liu Qingge' must've had some kind of sword training before (what a *nerd*) because his hand didn't so much as waver as he turned his gaze from Shen Yuan.

Maybe… he could… slink away…

That stern gaze met his again. "Do you think me a fool?" 'Liu Qingge' hissed, leaning closer so Cheng Luan tilted Shen Yuan's chin even higher. His heart stuttered in his chest. "Are you the demon haunting my dreams, *Shen Yuan* ?"

Liu Qingge really did embody the character. It still wasn't making sense. What did a cosplayer for a minor character like Liu Qingge have to gain from this? "Am I being pranked right now?"

There was a nearly imperceptible twitch under Liu Qingge's left eye. And underneath that eye twitch was a small mole, more conveniently situated like a beauty mark. If he didn't have a weapon pointed at him, Shen Yuan would've thought it was pretty.

"I'm not afraid," Liu Qingge said, his voice dropping dangerously low, "to shed blood when I need to, *Shen Yuan* ." The blunt side of the sword caressed his cheek, the metal cold and uninviting. If he had any doubts about the reality of the blade until now, they were all quelled.

Shen Yuan shivered. Blood rushed in his ears. He was going to die. At the hands of a Liu Qingge cosplayer, no less.

He dared to swallow and find his voice. “I s-swear it, Liu Qingge.” It felt stupid to indulge the man like this, but it’s all he had going for him. “I swear on my life. This isn’t a dream. I don’t know what happened to you when you decided to jump in front of a car—” Cheng Luan returned to the side of his throat. “—I-I mean when you nearly got hit, but it’s all true. This is 202X, you’re in China, and I’m *not a demon* !” The last part came out as a squeal, almost embarrassing, but Shen Yuan was fighting for his *life* , here.

Liu Qingge took a steady breath, though his expression didn’t match. He stared at Shen Yuan with those intense eyes for what seemed to be an eternity.

Should he grovel again? Cling to the hem of Liu Qingge’s robes?

“If you are not a demon,” Liu Qingge sheathed Cheng Luan and Shen Yuan flopped onto his spine on the floor. “And this isn’t the dream realm, then where am I?” He seemed to say it mostly to himself.

“I told you. This is 202X. You’re in China. And you’re very much awake.” Shen Yuan panted. His fingertips still trembled from adrenaline. If he attempted to stand, he probably would droop back down to the carpet in a puddle of goo.

That fucking author!! Airplane created a side character so malicious and heartless that he threatened the very person who healed his wounds and nursed him back to health! Granted, the ‘wound’ was a cut, but there was blood spillage and therefore Shen Yuan deserved at least a *thank you* . But no, Airplane had to make this *lunatic* so uncaring and ungrateful he almost died!

Shen Yuan’s heart rate finally slowed a sufficient amount. He stood up only briefly to sit comfortably on the sectional couch. The cushion molded perfectly to fit his butt.

Liu Qingge remained where he stood, eyes tightly shut and thumb under his chin in a thinking gesture. Shen Yuan didn’t dare disturb him in case he was hostile enough to whip out the weapon again.

“I need to meditate.” The man said after a while. Liu Qingge stepped away to stand in front of the wide windows overlooking the city. He faltered for a moment as if unsure of what he was seeing. Then, he sat cross-legged on the floor. “I will not be disturbed.”

It wasn’t a suggestion, more of a demand. Liu Qingge didn’t need to make a threat after the whole sword ordeal. If he fucked up, it would be Shen Yuan’s decapitated head on the floor at the end of the day.

If he called the police, they wouldn’t get here in time before the skilled swordsman unsheathed his blade and diced him into tiny pieces. This is what Shen Yuan got for trying to be a good person! He vowed to never be good again.

But as long as he didn't disturb him, Liu Qingge mustn't have cared much about Shen Yuan. He saved him from becoming roadkill, invited him into his home, revealed his secrets, and cleaned his injuries, but Liu Qingge seemed too preoccupied with his own concussion-induced dilemma to worry about what Shen Yuan did or didn't do.

In that case…

Shen Yuan didn't make a habit of hosting. In fact, he hardly had any friends that weren't online. Even online he wasn't liked, likely due to his strong opinions of web novels posted by ludicrous authors. From an outsider's perspective, his apartment was…less than tidy. Maybe he could clean some things while Liu Qingge meditated.

Every few weeks he would call into a cleaning company to hire someone for a general clean but he couldn't do that now… not when the last cleaning had only been a week and a half ago. Also, how pathetic would Liu Qingge think it was if he couldn't clean up his own shit?

Shen Yuan snuck to the kitchen. He started by collecting wrappers and tossing them into the trash, then scraping leftover ramen noodles and broth into the sink drain. He crushed the plastic cups and threw them in the bin.

Finally, he was cleaning all by himself! Like a real fucking adult!

"Do you *mind* ." The temperature in the apartment dropped in an instant at Liu Qingge's icy tone.

Shen Yuan was going to retort with an equally frigid response when he noticed Liu Qingge's hand hovering over the hilt of Cheng Luan. He swallowed the reply.

So, what *could* he do?

A short time later, Shen Yuan sat in his computer chair, twisting this way and that while he furiously typed a message. His fingers, digits that had ample practice in the ways of the keyboard, flew across the keys.

Dear Airplane,

I hope you're proud of yourself! Your shit novel, Proud Immortal Demon Way, *and your shit character, Liu Qingge, have really fucked me over!*

You may know me as an avid and passionate hater of your atrocious web novel. This isn't my usual groveling to persuade you to write a better fucking story, oh no, I'm writing to tell you how one of your characters ruined my life!

I don't know what kind of sick trick this is, but one of your devoted cosplayers has staged an attempted suicide to get my attention. From the goodness and kindness of my own heart, I took this poor soul into my home to nurse their wounds only for this fucking Liu Qingge cosplayer to pull out a perfect replica of Cheng Luan and hold it against my throat! This person is absolutely convinced they are your beloved Peak Lord of Bai Zhan. Even now, he

sits in my apartment, "meditating". The only reason I do nothing is because I fear for my own life!

Shen Yuan swiveled his way to his bedroom door. He poked his head out the doorframe to see Liu Qingge stock still in his meditative position, eyes shut to miss the setting of the sun. From what Airplane had described, he really did look like Liu Qingge. Bone-straight posture and silky black hair tied in his signature ponytail. His nose and eyebrows were sharp, but his eyelashes—

"I can *feel* you staring."

Shen Yuan yelped and slammed the door shut. He returned to the computer.

Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it! Do you want money? An apology? Say the word, but just get this fucking lunatic away from me or I'll sic the cops on you! My blood is on your hands, Airplane. Call off your fanatic dog!

Worst regards,

Peerless Cucumber.

Chapter 5: Clinic

Chapter Notes

> If you're wondering what the heck is up with these chapter titles, I went to a random prompt/word generator for most of these chapters to get some ideas! Some of the titles/prompts are my own ideas, however, and some (later on) come from the very helpful, inspirational, and mysterious J.

Shen Yuan steeled his voice, attempting to sound brave. “G-get up,” he stuttered. Well, so much for that.

Liu Qingge opened one eye to glance at him. He hadn’t moved from his position on the floor for hours. The sun had long since set behind the glittering city skyline, but Liu Qingge made no effort to eat some food, stretch his legs, or leave Shen Yuan’s apartment. How long was he going to stick around?

“I said I was not to be disturbed.” Liu Qingge shifted back to his meditative position.

Come *on* . A wave of hot, red fury bubbled and boiled in Shen Yuan’s gut. This asshole had *audacity* . He did every kind thing under the sun, let the man do his fucking weird-ass meditation or cultivation if he was pretentious enough to call it that, and he still couldn’t read the room?

“And *I* said *get up* .”

Liu Qingge leapt to his feet, standing toe-to-toe with Shen Yuan. Liu Qingge towered over him, nose turned up haughtily. “I am up.” He enunciated the three words carefully, patiently. His hand didn’t rest on the hilt of Cheng Luan, but he didn’t need it to. The threat was there.

Shen Yuan’s hands clenched into tight fists. “You can’t stay here. I want you to leave.” He was going to get *fucking* sliced and diced like a vegetable!

The corner of Liu Qingge’s mouth twitched. “And what will you do about it?” He scoffed, crossing his arms. His forearms brushed against Shen Yuan’s collarbones.

This was fine. He had prepared for this. In reality, there wasn’t much Shen Yuan could do if Liu Qingge refused, but he could choose to be kind again. Take Liu Qingge to a second location and leave him there under the guise of compassion. He’d just be grateful to get rid of the parasite. In another world, he’d push the psycho out of his fourteenth-floor window. “I will take you to the clinic to get you checked by a doctor. From there, they can help you.” Shen Yuan surprised himself with how calm and steady his voice sounded. Inside, his organs twisted and writhed like a boiling pot of instant noodles.

The cosplayer sneered again. “I am in no need of medical assistance. I am quite capable of handling the injury myself.” As if to prove a point, Liu Qingge raised his hand to his temple, pressing his palm against it. He flinched, only barely, but enough that Shen Yuan could see it. The sneer slid into a frown.

Perhaps qi didn’t work here? It gave Shen Yuan both a thrill of relief but simultaneously a sinking feeling of dread. A qi-less Liu Qingge cosplayer could still do real damage if they get pissy about having no powers. Well too bad, no one has powers here, genius. It could make him unpredictable, though. How would he take it?

“Qi deviation.”

“A concussion, probably.”

“Take me to a qi healer.”

Shen Yuan resisted the urge to roll his eyes and punch this guy in the face. Break that long, sloped nose. *Now* he wanted to cooperate and see a doctor. Maybe someone with a PhD could slap some sense into him. Break the news that he was not in fact the Liu Qingge from *Proud Immortal Demon Way* .

And just like that, they were heading out the door.

Liu Qingge didn’t have a single word to say while they entered the elevator. They listened to the elevator music in silence while Shen Yuan wondered where his life went wrong.

“There’s a 24-hour clinic within walking distance.” Shen Yuan led Liu Qingge out the doors to his apartment building, immediately feeling one thousand times lighter. Finally, he brought the parasite out of his apartment! Maybe now he wouldn’t be skewered!

The summer air hit them with its sticky humidity. It clung to their skin and their clothes, drenching them in seconds. As Shen Yuan fanned himself with his hand, Liu Qingge looked completely comfortable in his long sleeves, pants, and robes. There wasn’t a drop of sweat on his forehead.

Fucking bitch.

Shen Yuan snuck glances at Liu Qingge from the corners of his eyes as they walked. He was guarded, but his brows furrowed at the sparkling lights of the city, the cars whizzing past, and the groups of people passing them. Shen Yuan wasn’t a person to participate in the bustling nightlife Beijing had to offer; he’d much rather stay in the safety of his bedroom, hidden behind a keyboard and internet forums. When was the last time he had gone out with any friends? It had been so long ago, the fashions he saw on the street had him doing double takes. Maybe he was used to historical Chinese fashion like Liu Qingge wore from those goddamned novels he read.

He had to press his hand against Liu Qingge’s firm chest to prevent him from crossing the street prematurely. Why did he do that? Let the weirdo jump in front of a car again, what did he care? And again, Liu Qingge didn’t bother to say thank you while the cars flew past.

They had arrived.

It was the type of clinic Shen Yuan wouldn't be caught dead in. His parents had such a deluxe health insurance policy he never needed to go to a 24-hour clinic such as this. This, however, was an appropriate standard for Liu Qingge.

Much to his surprise, Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge had to wait only a few minutes before being seen. They walked behind the reception counter to a smaller office down a long hallway.

"You should sit on the bed," Shen Yuan said, suddenly exhausted. This whole situation was a fever dream. Meeting a psychotic Liu Qingge cosplayer, getting threatened at sword-point, and now taking his blackmailer to the clinic? Hopefully, he'd wake up tomorrow with a wiped memory. What he wouldn't give to run back home and crawl into bed, forgetting this ever happened. It would be so easy to be selfish.

Liu Qingge looked skeptically at the tall examination table. When he hopped on it, it was the first time Shen Yuan had seen him look so awkward and unnatural. He stared straight ahead at the *SMOKING KILLS!* poster on the wall.

Another few moments of silence.

God, why was he still here—

The doctor entered in a flurry of "hello my name is ---" and "what seems to be the problem today---" and all the other greetings one would give if they were in an underpaid and underappreciated profession. Shen Yuan felt his heart soften just a bit for these poor 24-hour clinic workers.

"I think he has a concussion," Shen Yuan said. If Liu Qingge spoke up, he'd embarrass himself. "He didn't look while crossing the street and almost got hit so I tackled him to the sidewalk. He hit his head and got a small cut, and ever since then has been acting like the character he's cosplaying as to an alarming degree."

Liu Qingge's gaze was sharp and narrowed. "I am not *acting* —"

"Leeet's take a look." Without another inquiry, the doctor examined Liu Qingge's temple. Liu Qingge flinched against the doctor's touch, appalled. She shone a light into his eyes, and he sputtered while attempting to slap her hands away.

Shen Yuan bit back a snicker at the scene. He was so invested in this character; Liu Qingge would never stand for such a rough treatment with so little warning! Surely this was like no healer book-Liu Qingge had ever seen.

"What are your symptoms?" She asked Liu Qingge.

Shen Yuan coughed into his hand. "Delusion."

The doctor wisely ignored Shen Yuan.

"I have no symptoms." Said Liu Qingge.

Of *course,* he'd try to be the hero. So big, so strong, blah blah blah.

"We can't do much if you don't have any symptoms." The doctor decided, pocketing her diagnostic penlight. "All I can recommend is some painkillers and to come back in if anything changes." She turned to Shen Yuan, writing some notes on her clipboard. "You should monitor him in case something goes wrong."

"We're not—"

"Sorry gentlemen, I have to go." And she swept out of the room like she was never even there.

So, that was the official diagnosis? Painkillers and monitoring? These 24-hour clinics were a joke. Shen Yuan packed up his things (shoving his phone in his pocket) and headed out the door.

Liu Qingge was hot on his heels. Shen Yuan raised his eyes heavenward. Someone, someone take this freak away from him!

Maybe Liu Qingge would read the fucking room and make himself scarce.

But he followed Shen Yuan in silence all the way to the front doors of his apartment building.

"Shouldn't you be leaving?" He asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Liu Qingge blinked at him. "The healer instructed I was to be monitored."

This… This schmuck! The audacious, pretentious asswipe! He threw a fit while at the clinic and now has the nerve to follow the doctor's orders? Shen Yuan's teeth ground together.

He caught a glimpse of Cheng Luan.

Fuck. He couldn't really say no. Not unless he wanted to be punctured by lamplight.

Shen Yuan forced a bitter smile. "After you, then." He punched in the door code, allowing Liu Qingge back inside. Back inside his sanctuary and safe house.

He was screwed.

Chapter 6: Pillow

Liu Qingge didn't get tired. He had cultivated too many years as Peak Lord to feel the effects of a lack of sleep. Men like him could endure days, weeks even, without proper rest. He scoffed. Even the other Peak Lords could never reach his level of cultivation, what he'd achieved by his age.

But standing in the transporting box with his tiny host, Liu Qingge ached as if he'd been trampled by ten consecutive carriages, forty horses, then crushed by a demon lord's hammer. Even that wouldn't usually cause that much damage, but for some reason…

He struggled to keep his eyes open and mind alert as he and Shen Yuan returned to his chambers.

Perhaps a prolonged, undisturbed rest would restore his strength and qi. Then he could *actually* wake up and find himself back in the comforts of his own time.

"It's late." Shen Yuan yawned after shutting the door behind them. He didn't even bother to cover his mouth. How crass. He seemed to have calmed down from his initial rage. Despite offering a smile to him, Liu Qingge wasn't stupid and could tell that Shen Yuan was less than happy about the situation.

As a Peak Lord, Liu Qingge couldn't care less what Shen Yuan thought.

There were tears in the corners of Shen Yuan's eyes from the aggressive yawn. "I guess I can give you some blankets for the couch." He motioned to the long lounge chair in the center of the room.

He was expected to sleep on this? Not even a proper bed? "No."

Shen Yuan's eyes twitched. "What do you mean, *'no'* ?"

"I require complete solitude. A door."

His host's cheeks flamed red, but Liu Qingge could see the exhaustion clouding his eyes. "Well maybe I *also* need a door."

Liu Qingge frowned. This was absurd. He was a Peak Lord. Anyone would be honoured to sacrifice their quarters for him. Anyone *normal* , that is. "Do you not understand who I am?" Liu Qingge lifted his chin, stepping forward to purposefully look down on Shen Yuan. This boy… barely a man, stubborn and small, but not stubborn enough. He was a pushover. A doormat. All Liu Qingge needed to do was look at him the wrong way and he would cower in fear.

As predicted, Shen Yuan blanched white as fast as he had turned red. He clenched his fists and looked to the ground. "Fine."

Liu Qingge struggled to swallow back his smirk of fulfillment. There was some sick gratification in breaking this scrawny man's resolve. The satisfaction he received from humbling his disciples for some reason wasn't as refreshing as seeing the restrained anger on Shen Yuan's features. "I figured you would see things my way," he mumbled.

Shen Yuan dared to send him a glare.

"I will wash up first." Liu Qingge turned on his heel and approached the room with the chamber pot.

He shut the door behind him, assessing the situation. The tub was there, and a spout for water, but there was no pump for the well, or pail to fill the tub. He frowned, then hmphed. Liu Qingge was a Peak Lord. He could figure this out.

It took some fiddling, but soon water was gushing warm from the spout. There was a brief problem with a leak in the tub but that was quickly stopped with a cork.

Liu Qingge stripped himself of his robes and sunk into the water once the tub was full. He exhaled a long breath, rubbing his sore shoulders. That was odd. Usually a soak in the hot springs would restore the feeling of qi in his core, uncoiling the tight knot of pent-up energy.

But he felt nothing.

It was fine, surely. Deviation was natural. The qi would inevitably return in due time. Until now, he would relax and rest, meditating and cultivating when he could. In the realm of his mind, he was in no danger.

But things still didn't make much sense. The rules of this realm felt different. The faces too defined, strangers he'd never met being too important of characters. None of these interactions were memories.

Foreshadowing, perhaps? But Liu Qingge, as talented and powerful as he was, would never live to this year. 202X… It couldn't be.

Liu Qingge dunked his head under the water, his long, black hair floating outwards like ink. Beneath the water, he could hear the throbbing of his heartbeat and the blood swirling in his ears. When he resurfaced, the light was too harsh, the air too humid.

Sleep. Sleep would help.

The water cascaded down his lithe body when he stood from the bath. He dried himself, wrapping the towel around his waist. Liu Qingge rooted around the shelves and cupboard for a comb but found none. Shen Yuan lived in a pigsty. He resorted to carding his fingers through his hair.

Steam poured from the room into the living area where Shen Yuan was fluffing the couch cushions and straightening an obscene amount of bedding. "Oh good, you're f—" Shen Yuan turned to face him.

Upon seeing the towel, his host's mouth parted in shock. Liu Qingge watched the tips of Shen Yuan's ears be painted red.

It was incredibly informal for a person of high status such as Liu Qingge to be seen in such a relaxed and underdressed state. If it weren't for the inconsequential realm , Liu Qingge would've reprimanded Shen Yuan for staring at him so openly.

He did have an excellent body: tall with broad shoulders, defined collarbones and a toned stomach. With his hair cascading down his back, damp from the bath, he looked especially wanton.

Shen Yuan's eyes followed a stray drop of water trailing down Liu Qingge's chest. He swallowed.

Again, it was extraordinarily fun to watch someone become flustered.

"Are you going to get some decorum, or keep staring?" Liu Qingge's voice was raspy from the bath.

Shen Yuan shook his head like a dog. "Are *you* going to keep standing there half-naked? For fuck's sake, put something on!"

Liu Qingge's robes were filthy from the fall in the street. "I have nothing else to wear."

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes so far Liu Qingge thought they would pop out of his skull. "Fine, I'll get you a shirt or hoodie or something." He muttered some profanities under his breath, but Liu Qingge pretended not to hear them. What could Shen Yuan do besides bark, after all? His teeth were dull.

They walked to the bedroom. Shen Yuan fished out a large black tunic, though shorter than Liu Qingge would prefer, and some kind of thick overcoat from the drawer. In another drawer, he selected a pair of patterned trousers. Something so ugly, Liu Qingge would never be caught dead in it. Where did one acquire such unfortunate-looking clothing?

He dropped the towel to put them on. The second it fell to the floor, Shen Yuan squealed like a young child, covering his eyes with the palms of his hands and spinning around.

" *For fuck's sake* !" He said again, voice shaky. "Give me some *warning!* "

Liu Qingge bit back a smile as he dressed.

The clothing was incredibly soft, almost like that of a fuzzy cat, or a soft rabbit. He marveled at the feel of it. "Now leave me." He told Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan scoffed. "Yeah, you're *welcome* ." He stormed away, slamming the door shut behind him.

Now that he was alone, Liu Qingge could investigate the room with more care and intention. He avoided the statues for now, not wanting to repulse himself even more than earlier.

The box on the table was a mystery, however. It wasn't shimmering and glowing as it had been before. Now, the center of it was as black as night. Bizarre.

In that moment, he was reminded of his tiredness. Liu Qingge approached the tall bed, turning over the thick blanket. Underneath were a few cushions: two plain, for his head, and a longer one.

The longer cushion was decorated with the likeness of Luo Binghe, though more scantily dressed. His pectoral and abdominal muscles bulged with strength; the robe tied loosely at the waist. The parting of the robe revealed beefy thighs and…. And--!

Liu Qingge's face flushed with an angry heat. This host, Shen Yuan, truly had all sorts of absurd trophies and trinkets! Despicable!

He tossed the long cushion onto the floor, kicking it with his toe.

The pillow flopped over, the back also painted with an erotically-portrayed Luo Binghe.

Liu Qingge was not safe from this disgusting display! He felt even the coverings on the bed would be contaminated with the image. Reluctantly, he slid under the blankets. Immediately, he was astonished again at the gentleness of the fabric and squishiness of the bed beneath him.

It was comfortable, almost alarmingly so. But it wasn't home.

Liu Qingge wasn't one to feel emotions of homesickness. Even while attending his Peak Lord duties, helping neighbouring cities, he never craved for the comfort of his own (clean) quarters like he had now.

But no matter. He shifted under the blankets, content for now, despite the vile displays the room offered.

And when Liu Qingge's eyes closed, a gentle smile graced his features. He would be back in his own bed tomorrow.

Chapter 7: Shopping

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He woke with a crick in his neck. The sun from the floor-to ceiling windows shone aggressively even with Shen Yuan's eyelids closed.

Ugh… Did he forget to close his blackout curtains--?

Ah. Right. He wasn't in his bedroom. He was sprawled across the couch cushions, blanket draped only over his ankle. His chest was damp with sweat.

That fucker, Liu Qingge, was in his bedroom. God, he hoped he died in his sleep.

After that ass didn't bother to turn on the bathroom fan during his fifteen-minute bath, Shen Yuan was left with a stickily humid space to do his own washing up. He had to wipe the mirror with a towel, scoop up Liu Qingge's clothes and toss them in the laundry hamper.

And now what? He was sleeping the day away while Shen Yuan cleaned the apartment? While he toiled away scrubbing at dishes, sweeping floors? The ungrateful bastard couldn't even offer to contribute in any way.

While musing, he reflected on yesterday. It was getting close to 24 hours since meeting Liu Qingge. It was awkward to refer to him as a cosplayer anymore. This guy was so strangely convinced of his identity. It wouldn't make sense that he *was* actually Liu Qingge, but his fall/concussion didn't seem serious enough to erase his memories before the cosplay. Everything rubbed Shen Yuan the wrong way.

Just who was this guy? This spitting image of Liu Qingge in appearance and character?

Shen Yuan ceased his scrubbing of pots. The clothes. He could check Liu Qingge's costume for tags. That could be a good indicator. Of course, since he did have them tailored, there may not be sufficient evidence.

Worth a shot.

He skulked to the bathroom, picking up the silky fabrics he dumped on top last night. The fabric was a little coarser than what Shen Yuan was used to, but the quality of the seams and stitching was exceptional. Shen Yuan turned the clothes inside and out, searching for any evidence of a tag, any kind of proof against Liu Qingge's claim.

Nothing. All he found was a tiny, stitched set of characters near the hem of Liu Qingge's pant legs. How strange…

He heard the bedroom door click open.

When he returned to the living room, he watched Liu Qingge emerge, frustratingly put-together despite how awkward he looked in Shen Yuan's clothes. The pajama pants didn't even hit his ankles, and he had shed the hoodie, remaining only in a t-shirt that was tight around his biceps. Even so, his hair was straight, not a hint of bedhead.

Goddammit.

"Find your own breakfast," Shen Yuan muttered, sticking a slice of bread into his toaster. He punched down the lever with unnecessary roughness.

"I am not hungry." He responded. Liu Qingge approached the kitchen, standing at the edge of the island. His gaze darted to the side as if he wanted to say something.

For fuck's sake . "Spit it out."

Liu Qingge's brow furrowed in confusion. "Spit…?"

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes heavenward. "Speak. What do you want now?"

He composed himself. "I would like my robes."

"They're dirty."

Liu Qingge sneered. "Still? Were they not cleaned while I rested?"

What was he, a maid? "What am I, a maid?"

A muscle ticked in Liu Qingge's jaw. While he stared unabashedly at Shen Yuan, his toast burst from the toaster. "Then," Liu Qingge started. His voice was carefully even. "I will need something to wear."

Shen Yuan gathered some margarine from the fridge, slapping it on the toast with a knife he collected from the sink that, honestly, wasn't too dirty, so it was okay. He pointedly side-eyed the man in his kitchen. "Seems like you're wearing clothes now."

In a flash, Liu Qingge was crowding Shen Yuan against the countertop. Shen Yuan's knife clattered against his plate.

Before he could stutter out a reply, Liu Qingge opened his mouth. "It *seems* ," he threatened, "that these clothes are too informal for me to wear."

A shiver danced up Shen Yuan's spine. He clenched his teeth and turned to stare Liu Qingge in the eyes. He attempted to match his even tone, but Shen Yuan's voice betrayed him, wavering slightly. "Then, dig around in my drawers and see if you find anything you like." With shaking hands, he returned to the toast.

Liu Qingge gripped his shoulder, turning him back around. "Look at me." His voice was icy. "I cannot continue wearing *this.* "

So Shen Yuan looked. Oh. It looked worse up close. The pants really *were* too short. The t-shirt was the same; the sleeves were fine, maybe, but the collar of the shirt rode up too high while the hem skimmed only the top of the pants. Shen Yuan spied a sliver of a tight abdomen. His mouth filled with saliva. Because of the toast.

"*Then* ," he tried again, "we'll go shopping."

Liu Qingge seemed satisfied with that. He stood patiently by the front door until Shen Yuan had finished choking down his dry toast.

He brushed the crumbs on his basketball shorts—that he slept in, but it was fine—and slid on his flip flops. Liu Qingge meticulously laced his slippers. When he stood to his full height, Shen Yuan couldn't help but laugh. What a sight he was! Since he had tied his hair into that elegant, long ponytail, the middle of him was a mismatch of patterns and ill-fitting clothes, while the bottom continued the historical façade. A historical sandwich with a homeless-man center.

He raised a quizzical brow.

"Nothing," Shen Yuan wheezed, "you look great."

They set off.

Shen Yuan didn't live far from a mall. He instantly began to sweat once they stepped outside. The sun was covered by a muggy layer of city smog, but it didn't block the pulsing heat from the sun bearing down on them.

The two walked in silence, Shen Yuan scrolling aimlessly on his phone, occasionally sneaking glances at the slow-walking Liu Qingge who cautiously surveyed his surroundings.

Shen Yuan pocketed his phone, observing the observer.

This guy really *didn't* seem to know much about 202X. Every whizz of a car made him twitch; his eyes lingered on the outfits of the people passing them on the sidewalk, the short skirts of women and baggy ripped jeans of men. Liu Qingge couldn't seem to tear his eyes from flashing billboards and neon signs. Every now and then he would gaze towards the sky, spinning on the spot to look at the skyscrapers.

What a weirdo , was Shen Yuan's first reaction. But then he almost felt bad for the guy. It was either some serious case of amnesia or…something else. Which wouldn't make any sense.

But they had arrived.

"Don't act weird." That was all the warning he gave before he led Liu Qingge inside the revolving door.

The air conditioner was a blessed relief. It was such a short walk, but the back of Shen Yuan's neck was damp nonetheless. Liu Qingge looked a little uncomfortable with the numerous floors of the mall, the music blasting over the speakers, and the few wet strands of hair plastered to his forehead.

“I guess you don’t know where to start.”

“That is correct.”

“Grrrrreat.” Shen Yuan tugged Liu Qingge’s sleeve into the closest menswear store he could see. It was mid-price, one he didn’t mind frequenting when he wanted something other than a graphic tee and baggy hoodie. “What kind of vibe are you going for?”

Liu Qingge battled with this. “Vibe?”

He resisted the urge to groan aloud. “You know, your look, your aesthetic.”

His eyes quickly scanned the racks and shelves of clothing. “None of these… appeal to me.” Watching Liu Qingge grow increasingly more uncomfortable at the lack of historical options caused conflicting emotions to bubble in Shen Yuan’s gut; he wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry.

Shen Yuan got the attention of a store attendant. “We need a wardrobe for this man. What do you think he’d look good in?”

Liu Qingge must’ve hated this. His eyes shot open in discomfort as the store attendant circled him, looking him up and down. The attendant whisked him away. He looked back once for help, but Shen Yuan offered a cheeky finger wave.

He could’ve ditched him there. Shen Yuan seriously considered it. He could run home in the sticky summer heat and lock his apartment door, hiding in his bedroom and return to heavily criticizing shit web novels. It was tempting.

But he thought of the doctor telling him that Liu Qingge had to be monitored. He could get hurt. He thought of Liu Qingge’s pleading eyes as he was led deeper into the store.

Okayyyy, he would just browse the store for a little bit.

He kept an eye on Liu Qingge holding his arms out reluctantly to be measured around his waist. The shirt rode up even higher on his torso, showing more of that milky-white skin below his bellybutton.

Sh— Shoes. They would need to buy shoes.

A pile of jeans, t-shirts, and light jackets were dumped into Liu Qingge’s arms. He disappeared into a dressing room.

Shen Yuan sat himself on an ottoman by the rooms, scrolling on his phone. He refreshed his email to see if Airplane had replied to this dumb fuck situation. Nothing yet. And now here he was, waiting for a Liu Qingge-wannabe to emerge from a dressing room in some slick new threads.

Not long after the attendant shoved him inside, Liu Qingge pushed back the dressing room curtains.

At first glance, everything was fine; great, even. He practically looked like a god in modern-day clothing. He started with a plain black t-shirt that covered the midriff Shen Yuan's shirt had revealed. The short sleeves hugged his biceps, collar exposing his sharp collarbones. When he lifted his arms to adjust his ponytail, Shen Yuan's eyes were drawn to Liu Qingge's long legs covered in denim. The jeans he wore were straight-legged and a dark blue wash. The fit was…exceptional.

Except something seemed off.

When the hem of his shirt lifted, uncovering the tops of his jeans, Shen Yuan's eyes bugged out from his skull.

"*Zip your fucking fly!"* He hissed.

Liu Qingge dropped his arms, confused. He stared blankly at Shen Yuan.

"*Your fly!"*

Still nothing.

"For fuck's sake." Shen Yuan pushed Liu Qingge back inside the dressing room.

Liu Qingge's spine hit the mirror as Shen Yuan drew the curtain closed behind them. When he attempted to hurriedly fasten the button on Liu Qingge's pants, the man wrestled his hands away.

"What do you think you're doing?" Liu Qingge's tone was frigid. The obnoxious fluorescent lights humming in the dressing room did little to hide the pink tips of his ears.

Oh god. Did he think Shen Yuan was making a move on him?! "Get over yourself, bastard!" Shen Yuan sputtered, breaking free of Liu Qingge's crushing grip. "I'm trying to make sure you don't embarrass yourself."

"This is disgraceful," Liu Qingge muttered.

"As disgraceful as having your dick hanging out?" He returned to the button. Shen Yuan instructed Liu Qingge to hold the hem of the t-shirt, and he did so, hesitantly. From his peripherals, Shen Yuan could see Liu Qingge looking pointedly in the opposite direction, straight at the ceiling.

This was odd, though. "Are you…" Shen Yuan didn't even want to ask. "…wearing underwear?"

The silence was *sooo* telling.

Shen Yuan finished buttoning and zipping the pants before pretending to choke Liu Qingge's slender throat. "God, I could just *wring your fucking neck right now!* "

Liu Qingge appeared as embarrassed as Shen Yuan felt. "Zip your own fucking fly next time!" He stormed out in a huff, leaving the psycho freak whack-ass loser asshole in the

dressing room.

Liu Qingge didn't come out to model any more clothes. He exited the dressing room not too long later, dressed in his original homeless-man sandwich set.

"Got everything?" Shen Yuan wanted to forget the whole ordeal. He wanted to distance himself from this man who walked around commando. He'd have to wash his pants three times before he could wear them ever again.

The man nodded. They approached the counter to pay. Shen Yuan stood at the front with Liu Qingge once they were called up. He placed his clothes on the counter. The clerk scanned them. They named a price. "Cash or card?"

Liu Qingge was silent.

"Well?" Shen Yuan prompted.

Liu Qingge turned to look at him. He looked as if he were uncomfortable. Put on the spot.

Oh, heck no. "Don't tell me…"

All he did was nod once.

Shen Yuan groaned to the sky. "Card," he muttered, pulling up the payment app on his phone. He tapped it against the clerk's screen. "Take your fucking bag." He grumbled to Liu Qingge before turning on his heel to leave the store.

"Shen Yuan."

His name on Liu Qingge's tongue did something silly to his insides, like they were piles of writhing worms.

"You have not paid."

Despite the frustration of shelling out money for a rando, Shen Yuan wanted to laugh again. "I paid with magic," he joked.

Liu Qingge replied almost instantly. "With qi? There is qi here?"

That sobered him. "No, I was joking. It's electronic. I can use physical money, but I don't have to."

Liu Qingge obviously didn't understand, but he didn't ask again. He was lost in thought, perhaps reflecting on how something could occur without the presence of qi. Maybe, for him, he felt qi could lurk below the surface and just needed to be uncovered.

It was a sad life this Liu Qingge lived in this qi-less world.

The other stores were easier to manage. Liu Qingge chose some shoes that he complained were "ill-fitting" (they fit as they should have), and were "so stiff and immovable" (they

weren't wrapped cloth, what did he expect). He sure complained an awful lot for someone who was receiving everything for free.

Then they picked up a pair of pajamas for Liu Qingge to wear at night. He asked the attendant for silk or linen robes, but they directed him to plaid flannel pants and pajama shirts with corgis riding scooters. He wasn't so happy about that either.

Liu Qingge went into a washroom to change into his new clothes. When he came out, he looked like a totally different man. He was adamant on keeping the long, swishy ponytail, but it only made him look cooler and more aloof with the dark t-shirt and jeans and his new shoes.

He garnered more attention, unwanted, it would seem. Liu Qingge rubbed his bare arms as if he were cold (maybe he was, the mall was always cooled to a Mobei-jun level). Women and men alike gave him double takes as the pair walked by. He was tall, had great posture, and looked like he had deep, dark secrets anyone would want to uncover.

Shen Yuan could see the appeal. Kind of.

He checked his phone; the first time in a while. It was already past 3pm, no wonder he was starving.

"You hungry?" He asked Liu Qingge, who was currently nearly pressing his pointed nose against the window to a colourful toy shop.

He nodded.

Shen Yuan smirked. This Liu Qingge was in for quite the culture shock.

Chapter End Notes

what other fun clothes should Sugar Daddy Shen Yuan buy for Liu Qingge?

Chapter 8: Hamburger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the perfect place to take him. What better place than a billion-dollar corporation renowned worldwide? Full of electronic machines to take orders and screens and food delivered to your table all conveniently-wrapped in paper packaging.

“This,” Shen Yuan told Liu Qingge, “is fine dining.”

Shen Yuan pushed open the doors to the three-floored McDonald’s.

Liu Qingge stopped in his tracks, mouth open as he gaped at the sight. Families, couples, and individuals crowded the building, sitting in booths, at tables. Some robots delivered the wrapped food, people ordered on electronic kiosks.

Shen Yuan ordered for them both, a Big Mac meal each. “What do you want to drink?” He asked, punching ‘no pickles’ on the customization section.

“Tea.” Liu Qingge’s voice still sounded mystified at the sight.

“No, you’re getting a chocolate milkshake.” Shen Yuan grinned at the screen. For whatever reason, if this Liu Qingge was who he claimed to be, Shen Yuan was either going to blow his mind or kill him on the spot. Hopefully the latter.

They sat at a sticky table. Liu Qingge rested his palms in his lap to avoid the sensation. He said nothing, just continuing to guardedly check over his shoulders at the families and screaming children who begged to be taken to the equally, if not more, sticky play place.

Mere moments after they sat, a robot rolled up to their table. Shen Yuan took the tray from it, making sure to catch Liu Qingge’s reaction.

Liu Qingge pressed his spine against the seat of the booth, looking on in horror. His fingernails dug into the vinyl of the cushy seat. “What kind of *horrible animal* is this?” His lips curled.

This was *so* satisfying. “A robot.” Shen Yuan answered nonchalantly, tossing the wrapped burger and a packet of fries to Liu Qingge. He slid his chocolate milkshake cup across the table.

He watched Liu Qingge mouth the strange words, not settling back in his seat until the robot was out of view. Then he assessed the meal in front of him.

Shen Yuan had already torn into it; half finished his Big Mac. God, he *was* hungry. He swallowed most of the chewed food in his mouth. “Eat,” he instructed.

Liu Qingge spent a considerate amount of time scanning his meal before daring to pick up a limp fry. When it flopped over, he let it drop to the table. “Where are the utensils?”

This guy… “Like the chopsticks?”

Liu Qingge nodded.

“There are none. Eat with your hands.” To help, Shen Yuan smeared his greasy fingers onto a napkin and unwrapped Liu Qingge’s straw. He poked it into the plastic hole in his cup and lifted it to his table partner’s lips. “Drink.”

The Bai Zhan Peak Lord batted at the straw. It regressed his age by at least 20 years. He picked at the lid, unsure of what to do.

“Oh my god.” Shen Yuan rolled his eyes. “Watch.” He proceeded to slurp the milkshake from his own straw.

Liu Qingge observed, somewhat uncomfortable. Hesitantly, he did as shown. The action was so simple, but Liu Qingge managed to make it look idiotic as his lips wrapped around the tube. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but the straw changed colour as the chocolate milkshake made its way up into Liu Qingge’s mouth.

He jerked backwards, choking before swallowing. His pink tongue darted out to lick his lips. “It’s…”

Shen Yuan leaned forward, anticipating.

“…horribly sweet.”

He barked out a laugh. So candid! So in-character! Tears pebbled in the corners of his eyes at the absurdity. “Now try your burger.” Shen Yuan’s jaw felt as if it would split open from the delight of witnessing this moment.

Liu Qingge picked at the paper around the burger. He peeled it back, puzzling at the contents inside. In a typical McDonald’s fashion, the top bun was halfway off the contents in the middle, and the bottom was halfway off that in the opposite direction. A diagonal tower of processed, lukewarm food.

Shen Yuan could see the loading sign in his brain. What would he think of this? The bun, the round and flat slab of meat (if you could call it that), the wilty lettuce, a slapped on pickle. He shoved the last bite of his own burger into his mouth to see this.

Liu Qingge seemed to steel himself to the potential embarrassment. He picked up the burger with the very tips of his fingers, like getting a firm grasp on it would turn him into a barbarian. He faltered only the slightest amount before opening his mouth and sinking his teeth into the burger. He chewed, he swallowed.

“Well?”

Liu Qingge forced another bite. The furrowing of his eyebrows softened at the second one, like he was getting the hang of the burger-thing now. Then a third bite. “It is sufficient.” He said plainly after he swallowed.

Shen Yuan could accept that. “Your first burger experience. Would you get another one if the opportunity arose?”

The War God tongued his cheek. “I do not know.”

What a boring answer. “There are different flavours, you know. Different varieties of burgers.”

“I would not like another one right now.” He was close to halfway finished with his tiny bites. There was no urgency with this guy, was there?

And he wasn’t *offering* to buy another one. Liu Qingge could use his own money to get another burger if he so desired. He was so entitled.

But now this guy was fed, clothed, and seemed to be in better condition than when he got thrown to the sidewalk yesterday. Maybe Shen Yuan could ditch him. But how could he do it? They already paid, so Shen Yuan wouldn’t feel guilty about leaving him here with the bill.

Adrenaline surged in his chest. Yes, now would be the time. He would go ‘to the bathroom’, then dash out the door. In his concussed state, Liu Qingge wouldn’t have the energy to pursue. It was foolproof.

Shen Yuan would come to find out that Liu Qingge was no fool.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” he announced, subtly gathering his phone and wallet. He’d leave the bag of clothes to Liu Qingge. You know what? He could keep Shen Yuan’s pajama pants and t-shirt. He could replace them easily enough, and wouldn’t want to wear clothes that touched this guy’s body ever again anyways.

He tried walking calmly at first. Throwing a quick glance over his shoulder, Shen Yuan saw Liu Qingge watching him intently from the booth. His eyes narrowed.

Now or never . Shen Yuan’s shoes squeaked against the sticky tile floor as he made a bolt for the automatic doors. They swished open, and then he was out in the summer humidity again.

Shen Yuan ran, deciding not to care about the sweat beading on his temples and the back of his neck. Freedom was near! Finally, he could have his apartment back. His *bed* back. One day on the couch was all he needed. He would never be kind to a stranger ever again!

A smile mistakenly crept up his cheeks.

And then he looked behind him.

He nearly tripped over his own toes at the sight.

Liu Qingge wasn't far behind him, running with the form of an Olympic athlete. He was gaining on him astonishingly fast. The shopping bag swung sporadically on his elbow, but it didn't deter him. "*Shen Yuan!"* He bellowed.

Fuck . It suddenly became hard to breathe. Maybe it was the air, maybe it was the fear that the stranger he helped would slice his throat at his disobedience. He'd abandoned him, and now Shen Yuan would pay the price! Though it felt impossible, he ran harder.

Liu Qingge easily adapted to the speed, and Shen Yuan could hear his pounding footsteps behind him, approaching closer.

Shen Yuan thought about crying out for help at the passing crowd, but he couldn't form the words from the lack of breath in his lungs. If he kept running, he was going to pass out!

Warm fingers closed around his wrist. Before Shen Yuan could yelp out in surprise, he was tugged into a nearby alley, spine crashing against the brick wall. His head spun from the impact, chest heaving from exertion.

Shen Yuan's eyes finally registered Liu Qingge hovering above him. His forearm pressed against Shen Yuan's collarbones. He was going to get choked to death. Liu Qingge was going to cut off his air supply and leave his body to rot behind one of these dumpsters while he squatted in Shen Yuan's apartment. He would eat Shen Yuan's food and use Shen Yuan's money and enjoy Shen Yuan's video games and laugh at Shen Yuan's browsing history.

"Why," Liu Qingge rasped, barely sounding out of breath from the sprint, "did you try to abandon me?"

Shen Yuan clawed at Liu Qingge's forearm, but he didn't budge. He instead took one of his wrists and pinned it to the concrete wall behind him. "*Answer me* ."

"B-because," Shen Yuan sputtered and gasped. "You're fine now! You have clothes and—and food, you don't need me anymore! Now get your *fucking* arm off me!" He flailed his legs, but didn't land a blow.

Liu Qingge didn't respond to Shen Yuan's threats. "You were instructed to care for me." His voice was low and deadly. A cold chill seeped into Shen Yuan's bones. "I cannot survive here without you."

The phrase startled him. Shen Yuan's breath returned as he relaxed against the wall and stopped resisting. It just got more and more confusing. Liu Qingge had almost entirely convinced Shen Yuan that he was who he claimed to be. What did he mean not being able to survive without Shen Yuan? Was this simply a manipulation tactic by a deranged psycho to force him into servitude?

But the sword. The clothes. The consistency to his story. The percentage of believability slowly crept higher the longer Liu Qingge kept this up.

It felt all kinds of wrong. And all kinds of weird.

Liu Qingge’s dark gaze continued to pierce into him. The mole under his eye twitched with impatience. His breath was warm on Shen Yuan’s nose.

Shen Yuan had made a decision. It was against his better judgement. Against everything he believed as the spoiled brat he was. Something in his gut told him he couldn’t say no.

“Fine. I’ll keep helping you.”

He was making a big, fat mistake.

Chapter End Notes

poor boy :'(

Chapter 9: Home

Relief seeped into Liu Qingge's chest like a cool fountain of water. He stepped back as soon as he heard those reassuring words. Shen Yuan coughed dramatically into his fist despite not having even been *choked* , but he was acting like it was his first breath in twenty minutes. So dramatic.

After Shen Yuan caught his breath and gave Liu Qingge a few skeptical glances, they made their way back to the apartment.

They were silent the whole way back.

Liu Qingge's brain rattled with questions, theories, possibilities. Things were starting to add up, but the numbers weren't making any sense. The hunger Liu Qingge felt in his belly before they ate was too real for the dream realm. He had slept, had dreams of his own, before waking in the same bed he tucked himself into the night before. The food he chewed, swallowed, and was now digesting tasted *real* , was tangible in his fingers. Even now, he still felt the sticky residue of the sauce from it.

The summer heat was bearing down on his shoulders while they walked home. It stung the back of his tanned neck. Sweat gathered quicker than usual in these strange clothes he wore. The fabric, feeling comfortable and relaxing in the store, now felt tight and suffocating.

His pants were thick and clung to his legs, the shoes too curved and awkward for his feet. His ponytail was the only semblance of regularity. If he had Cheng Luan on his hip, he'd feel even more at ease. But Shen Yuan insisted he leave it behind. "You'd get arrested if you brought that into the mall, you fucking weirdo," he had said.

Liu Qingge didn't appreciate the language, but he trusted the advice from his host.

And then they were there.

"Well," Shen Yuan said, scratching the back of his neck. He rocked back and forth on his heels. "I think I'll be in my room for a bit. Let me know if you need anything, I guess." He disappeared, sending Liu Qingge one last puzzling look before closing the door to his bedroom.

Liu Qingge was alone with his rattling thoughts. They ricocheted around his brain like stray blasts of qi.

He sat by the window in his meditative position, needing to adjust the uncomfortably tight pants around his thighs. It would be fine. He had cultivated for months, years even, before his deviation of qi subsided. It was just a little blockage. He could tune back into the qi and then return to Bai Zhan Peak where he belonged.

The first time he meditated yesterday, nothing had happened, but no matter. Things like this took time.

Even with his eyes shut, his breathing even and centered, Liu Qingge couldn't stifle the coiling of anxiety low in his stomach.

But he had been fooled by the dream realm before. The dream realm was nearly impossible to discern from reality. People could easily get lost in such a place without the proper skills and cultivation. The problem was, for someone of Liu Qingge's power with qi, why would he have such a difficult time escaping the realm? And why had he seen no examples of demonic power or apparitions?

With his eyes squeezed shut, the thoughts continued to race. His fingers, usually relaxed, were gripping at his knees. If he dug hard, he could feel the pinch of his fingernails through the fabric of his pants.

Just a little harder; if he cultivated with more intensity, he could—

Liu Qingge's eyes snapped open. He needed to go outside, in nature. Yes, there he could find the missing connection to his qi. Even the thought of the gentle sway of tree's leaves and the sounds of birds' flapping wings calmed him.

That's what he would do. He was confident this would be his final journey in this dream realm. Liu Qingge gathered his things. He looped Cheng Luan around his waist and considered the clothes he arrived in. No, what he was wearing would be fine. Besides, he could easily get new clothes made once he returned to his home. He lurked in the entrance and his hand hovered over the handle. Should he tell Shen Yuan? After a moment of considering, he decided that no, he wouldn't. He was an inconvenience to his honest anyway.

He turned the handle and left.

Liu Qingge found his way from Shen Yuan's quarters to the entrance of the building easily enough. He had watched Shen Yuan press the button in the transportation device to end up on the ground floor. Miraculously, it had worked like before. It was still a mystery for him, but Liu Qingge wasn't going to remain here any longer than he had to to figure it out.

The sun was beginning to set when Liu Qingge walked through the doors. Immediately, he got a few strange looks at the sword on his hips, but he paid the starers no heed. Soon, he would go back to where carrying weapons was a normal occurrence and reassured safety, not danger.

Liu Qingge spotted a cluster of trees not too far on the horizon. Perfect, nature to rest in. Hopefully it was far enough outside the city that it would be free from the oppressive metal structures that towered over his head.

He walked and walked along the crowded streets, ponytail swishing behind him. Liu Qingge ignored the giggling women with no integrity eyeing his body. Disgusting behaviour.

He soon approached the manicured-looking forest filled with meticulously lined pathways and bushes carved into a variety of shapes and animals. This was something you would find at a palace, not for public usage! Any and all sorts lurked here. Families, couples (gross),

groups of friends, people alone. Liu Qingge observed his surroundings while continuing to walk deeper into the park. As beautiful as this nature was, it wasn't what he wanted to see.

Liu Qingge growled in frustration. The paths were too wide, there was nowhere secluded to gather his thoughts. People covered every bench, even lay on the short grasses, sharing snacks with their partners. Even a cave would suffice; but there was nothing in sight that was suitable for meditation.

He turned his eyes to the sky and frowned. There were no stars to guide him. The sky, although it had been relatively clear during the day, was tinged an uncomfortable green from the flickering lights of the looming metal towers.

It infuriated him.

Nothing in this world, realm, wherever, seemed made for qi. No one seemed to use it, unless those who did were hidden somewhere. But in a place as big as this… how would he not have encountered anyone yet? What was reality? What was fake?

Maybe meditation was worth a shot. Liu Qingge sat cross-legged on the grass, as far from people as he could manage. He refused to remove Cheng Luan from his side, even if it interfered with his focus. Something told him leaving his weapon unattended, no matter how close, was dangerous here.

His eyes fluttered shut. Liu Qingge fell into the meditative position easily. With practice, this was second nature to him.

He didn't get far into his relaxation before a horn, almost like that of a war horn, blared in the distance. It startled him, he turned to find the skirmish, but saw no signs of distress in anyone else. Strange.

He tried again. There were no birds chirping or wings flapping, but if he tuned in, he could hear the wind passing through the leaves. Only for a moment, however, because he was *then* interrupted by the raucous laughter of youth and children.

Liu Qingge grit his teeth.

Maybe Shen Yuan's home was the best option after all. He could open a window, or sit on the top of the building if he fucking had to. Fine. That is where he would go.

Liu Qingge brushed the grass from his pant legs and started walking down the stone-lined path. The path then branched into three different directions. This park, he realized, was much larger than he initially thought. It only added to his anger and unease. He was so concerned about restoring his qi that he hadn't bothered to pay attention to where he was going!

Not to worry, he would simply choose one. That he did, and it wasn't long before he realized nothing looked familiar. Excellent.

He made eye contact with a passing stranger. "Where can I find the residence of Shen Yuan from here?" He asked.

The person gave him a quick once-over, eyes lingering on Cheng Luan. “Sorry,” they swallowed, “I don’t know a Shen Yuan.” Hurriedly, they scurried onwards.

That was extremely unhelpful. Liu Qingge frowned harder, if it was possible. He retraced his steps, struggling over which of the two remaining paths to take.

Not long after taking a few steps forward, he was tapped on the shoulder.

Liu Qingge whipped around, hand clutching Cheng Luan’s hilt. Not just *anyone* would lay a finger on the War God of Bai Zhan Peak like this!

He faced two large men, decked in matching, bulky clothes. The cloth was black in colour and their waists were adorned with gadgets and weapons. “Excuse me,” one said, pointing carelessly at Cheng Luan, “you can’t have a sword in the park.”

Liu Qingge scoffed. “Silly man.” He made his own vague gesture to the man’s long rod fastened to his belt. “You have your own weapon in the park.” He was no fan of hypocrisy.

“You should be careful who you’re talking to,” the other chided, taking one step closer.

A smile almost creeped up Liu Qingge’s lips. He was itching for a chance to stretch his muscles. A fight between these two goons would be the perfect opportunity. Slowly, he began to unsheathe Cheng Luan—

“Where the fuck have you been?”

Liu Qingge’s breath caught in his throat. He knew that voice. Over his shoulder he saw a disheveled Shen Yuan scuffing clumsily towards him in his idiotic shoes.

“I’m so sorry, officers,” Shen Yuan bowed, out of breath, to the two men. “My friend here gets easily confused and he slipped away from me.”

Confused ? Liu Qingge curled his lip. He was far from confused. It was *these* two fools who were confused.

“Let’s go back home.” Shen Yuan tugged on Liu Qingge’s sleeve after bowing once more to the men. They harrumphed and walked away.

As soon as they weren’t looking anymore, Shen Yuan dropped the act. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” He hissed. “Where were you? Why did you just disappear?”

The way Shen Yuan’s brow lowered had Liu Qingge pause in the retort he had planned. There was something about the scolding tone of voice and the way his eyebrows knotted that reminded him the tiniest, slightest amount of Shen Qingqiu.

Liu Qingge banished the thought instantly. Foolish.

“You make a big fuss about needing me to survive but then go fucking AWOL when I close my bedroom door for thirty minutes!”

There was another word that didn't sit right in his brain. He didn't care to ask. "How did you find me?" Liu Qingge was curious, as he himself had gotten lost amongst the trees and winding paths.

Shen Yuan huffed. "I saw you on an internet forum."

Now he was just speaking in riddles.

"Someone took a picture of a lunatic with a sword and reported it to the police. I dropped everything and ran because you were going to make an idiot of yourself if you started waving that weapon around any more."

Underneath all the insults, what Shen Yuan said was almost kind. Not that Liu Qingge needed the help of a scrawny loser like this guy. Even though he actually did.

Shen Yuan managed to lead them back to a road Liu Qingge recognized. Together, they returned home.

The word 'home' still didn't feel correct to Liu Qingge, but it was the best he had at the time. His real home was elsewhere, just out of reach. For now, he thought, removing his shoes once inside and staring out Shen Yuan's massive windows into the expansive city, this place would have to do.

Chapter 10: Elixir

Chapter Notes

obligatory sick fic

This guy was an idiot.

After his disappearing act a few days ago, this Liu Qingge had to just decide to get disgustingly sick, germifying Shen Yuan's whole apartment. Did he mean to do it? Probably not, but it didn't matter when now Shen Yuan had to wear a face mask and rubber gloves in the comfort of his own home.

It had started the morning after he had collected Liu Qingge from the park, narrowly saving him from getting thrown into prison and rotting there for the rest of his life because he would have no doubt picked prison fights (and won).

Shen Yuan, already a person who easily slept in past socially acceptable, had exhausted himself of rest and reluctantly peeled his body from the couch to take those few difficult steps to the kitchen.

He had eaten his toast and had a slurp of a leftover energy drink before finally checking the time. It was the afternoon, yet he hadn't seen or heard any signs of Liu Qingge.

Whatever, he originally thought, *it's not my fucking problem*. But then he remembered the strong urge to play video games on his desktop. Before the whole rescue scenario the day before, he was getting particularly invested in the storyline of his characters when he saw the long, black ponytail and equally-long sword at Liu Qingge's slender hips on an internet forum.

The original poster had claimed that Liu Qingge approached them, asking for directions. Apparently, they added, Liu Qingge had also threatened to use Cheng Luan if he was told an answer he didn't like.

That part Shen Yuan kind of believed, but he didn't want to clarify with Liu Qingge in case *he* was the one with that sword against his throat *again*.

So, he let Liu Qingge crash on his bed out of the kindness and generosity of his own heart while he spent another painful night on the couch cushions. In all honesty, it wasn't that bad, but he still missed the way the contours of his mattress shaped his body.

Maybe he would poke his head in and see if Liu Qingge was awake.

Shen Yuan tiptoed to his own bedroom door in his own goddamn apartment like an idiot, and cracked it open. He craned his neck to peer inside the darkened room.

Sure enough, Liu Qingge still lay on the bed, eyes shut. Just before he could close the door, Shen Yuan noticed something odd. These weren't the mannerisms of someone deep in sleep. Liu Qingge's dark eyebrows were furrowed, sweat beading on his forehead. He shifted restlessly underneath the covers as if he were experiencing a nightmare.

Good riddance.

But Liu Qingge groaned. His chest heaved under the blankets before releasing a croaky cough into the air.

That was the final straw. Shen Yuan didn't fuck with germs. One germ inevitably meant more germs. *His* germs were fine, but the germs of others? Now those, those could kill. All throughout his childhood Shen Yuan caught every sickness under the sun. He was coddled and taken to specialty doctors who misdiagnosed him with rare and expensive problems that honestly didn't need fixing because nothing was wrong in the first place.

He just had a shit immune system.

Shen Yuan pressed his spine to the door, brain working overdrive. He had to kick Liu Qingge out. Take him to a hospital or something, they could take care of him there. Shen Yuan didn't sign up to babysit a grown ass man with some kind of character complex.

But he promised. And if he didn't keep his promise, Cheng Luan would make a reappearance the second Liu Qingge regained strength. Maybe the sickness wasn't that bad anyways?

Shen Yuan looted his own bathroom cabinets, selecting a medical-grade mask and latex gloves.

He crept to the bedroom again, turning the knob with careful fingers and stepping inside. Even as he approached Liu Qingge, the man didn't stir aside from his occasional thrashing. With trembling hands, Shen Yuan brushed them against Liu Qingge's damp forehead. Through the latex, it was burning hot.

Great. Now he felt obligated to help.

Okay, what did he do? How did his parents and nurses care for him when he was ill as a child?

Antibiotics. Tea. A cool cloth. Alright, that was a fine battle plan.

He left the room again to gather the materials. He set the kettle to boil and dumped a bag of green tea into a mug. Shen Yuan poured some tap water into a bowl with a facecloth and set it on his bedside table. He collected every kind of antibiotic known to man from his bathroom cupboards and brought them to the bedside table as well. His own little medical station.

Shen Yuan pulled the swivel chair from his desk (he'd have to sanitize it later) and sat beside the bed.

Liu Qingge was awake now, eyes glazed over. Yet, he still managed to look furious. “Go away,” he muttered, attempting to turn over.

Shen Yuan splayed a hand on his chest to stop him. Only then did he realize that Liu Qingge must have shed his shirt sometime in the night as those bare pecs were exposed to him once again. The room increased twenty degrees at the feeling of the firm muscle under his palm. Of course, it was only because the man had an admirable body that anyone would be jealous of.

The muscles were the first thing he noticed, naturally, but he paused at the crisscross of scars, long and short, decorating his torso. Last time Liu Qingge was too far away to see them. But this close he could study every one if he desired. How did he get them…?

“Get *off*,” Liu Qingge hissed, eyes narrowing. He tried to sit up and the blankets slid down to his abdomen. More scars there. He didn’t get far, however, and soon collapsed back onto his spine.

Shen Yuan tried not to stare at the sweaty, tensing muscles around Liu Qingge’s belly button as he brought the blankets back up to cover it. Liu Qingge’s face was flushed from the illness, or from the exposure, Shen Yuan didn’t know. “You’re sick, bonehead.” He said.

He took the facecloth from the bowl to wring it out and dab at Liu Qingge’s forehead. The man swatted him away with a shaky arm.

“Are you gonna be a baby about it? Or do you want me to help you feel better?”

Liu Qingge whined, similar to the way a bratty child would.

This guy *was* a baby! For claiming to be the War God of Bai Zhan Peak, he sure was a fussy kid. “I’ll happily leave you to suffer if you want.”

“Leave me.” Liu Qingge wheezed. He closed his eyes again.

Fine. Shen Yuan left the medicine, water, and tea there in case Liu Qingge wanted it. But this is what his kindness did. Liu Qingge was so horribly ungrateful for his hospitality he could rot in Shen Yuan’s bed for all he cared.

Shen Yuan stomped to the living area, scrolling through forums on his phone and refreshing his emails to no avail. Still nothing from Airplane. He didn’t get far on another social media website before he heard a loud clatter from the bedroom.

He leapt from his seat on the cushions and dashed inside only to find Liu Qingge struggling to emerge from the bed. His knuckles were white from gripping the corner of the bedside table and the mug of tea had fallen to the floor.

Fucking hell. This is what he got for refusing help. “For fuck’s sake,” Shen Yuan sighed. “Lie back down.” He pushed Liu Qingge’s shoulder to the bed and he fell back without much resistance.

Shen Yuan sat on the swivel chair after sopping up the tea mess. Then, he wiped at Liu Qingge's sweaty forehead and throat with the damp facecloth. He rested it over his eyes. "Keep it there, I'll make you more tea." Before standing up, he looked at the man laying ill on his mattress.

Liu Qingge's mouth was set in a hard line and his ears burned red. It was obvious this was someone who wasn't used to being cared for. Perhaps he even thought it cowardly to have someone else look after him. That was such a sign of weakness, Shen Yuan thought. Why not take what someone else could give?

He boiled more water with a fresh green tea bag.

When he returned, Liu Qingge was shivering under the blankets as if he were a small rabbit trembling with cold in the winter wind. It made him appear younger, almost endearingly so, even if he was a huge pain in Shen Yuan's ass.

"Here." He held the mug to Liu Qingge. "Sit up. Or do you need help?"

Liu Qingge sneered through chattering teeth. "I can do it myself." His biceps shook as he propped himself up and took the mug from Shen Yuan. Through the latex gloves, Shen Yuan could feel the chill of Liu Qingge's fingers in contrast from the steaming hot mug.

But when passed into his shaky hand, the tea sloshed over the rim and spilled onto his chest. Liu Quingge emitted a rare and weak swear and returned the cup to Shen Yuan.

As a rule, Shen Yuan didn't get close to sick people, let alone host them in his home, but he'd rather nurse this leech back to health than drag a dead body to the elevator.

He set the cup down and sighed while he used the cloth to wipe up the spill. Liu Qingge grimaced in embarrassment, and Shen Yuan grimaced for the same reason. God, it was so weird, a man caring for another man. It didn't help that Liu Qingge had begun to cling onto Shen Yuan's shoulders for support. Liu Qingge's body was emanating burning heat in pulsing waves so hot that Shen Yuan himself began to sweat. He resisted every urge to shove him off.

Shen Yuan cupped the back of Liu Qingge's damp neck and offered the tea again. He watched carefully as Liu Qingge parted his chapped lips to accept the warm tea into his mouth.

"Qi deviation," Liu Qingge whimpered after he swallowed.

Shen Yuan prepared a spoonful of medicine. "What?"

"It has to be." He sniffed the medicine. "This elixir smells foul."

"This *elixir* will make you feel better." He struggled not to roll his eyes. "Yeah, qi deviation, it makes so much sense." Better to indulge a dying man than anger him. He pushed the spoon into Liu Qingge's mouth. It clinked against his teeth, but Liu Qingge behaved and swallowed it.

He coughed into his elbow. "This elixir *tastes* foul. Are you sure it's not poison?"

“No.”

Liu Qingge had the energy to look alarmed for half a second before he lay back down. “If you poison me,” he bit out, drawing the covers to his shoulders again, “I’ll kill you.”

Shen Yuan slapped the cold facecloth on his forehead. “If you survive the poison, I sure would like to see you try.”

And so it went on for three days. Tea, spoonfuls of broth bought at a grocery store, medicine. Cool facecloth, helping the sweaty man stumble to the bathroom, sleep, sleep, and more sleep.

Occasionally Liu Qingge would mumble in his delirious state, but never words Shen Yuan could catch.

“I have to…go back…” He groaned one afternoon while Shen Yuan held a thermometer to his forehead.

Shen Yuan didn’t ask where he needed to return to, he didn’t have to.

“The disciples…the sect…”

Ugh, this again.

“Shen…”

Oh? That piqued his interest. “Shen Qingqiu? Do tell, Liu Qingge.” As much as Shen Yuan hated the atrocious novel Airplane had written, he’d do anything to get his hands on more gossip between the Peak Lords.

Liu Qingge tossed and turned. “I need…”

Shen Yuan leaned closer in anticipation. His ear hovered over Liu Qingge’s mouth waiting to catch any sliver of a word.

“…him. Shen Yuan.”

The thermometer clattered to the floor. Shen Yuan’s swivel chair spun and rolled as he stood from it. It was as if someone dropped a cube of ice down the front of his shirt.

That’s it. He was done caring for this lunatic.

Shen Yuan stomped to the living room, cheeks abnormally warm. Okay, okay. Let’s think about this. Liu Qingge did say he had to go *back* , and Shen Yuan was not *back* in wherever Liu Qingge thought he came from. But he said his name, his full name. No, maybe he was saying ‘I need him, Shen Yuan,’ instead of ‘I need him. Shen Yuan,’ which would be significantly better.

That must’ve been it. Ha. And Liu Qingge was speaking *to* Shen Yuan so he would never say such a thing like that. Great! It was settled. All those strong emotions for nothing.

For a few hours while Liu Qingge rested, he scrolled aimlessly on his phone ignoring those twinges of uncertainty and discomfort in his gut. They amounted to nothing, but his phone was a fine distraction.

As the sun began to set signaling the end of another day, Shen Yuan donned the mask and gloves to check on his patient a final time before bed. He didn't bother knocking on the door to his own room.

Shen Yuan nearly stumbled back through the doorway when he saw Liu Qingge standing there in front of him. He wasn't hunched over this time, he stood at his full, towering height. His hair somehow managed to still look clean despite being bedridden for the past few days, it hung loosely down his shoulders. The pajama pants Shen Yuan bought him sat low on Liu Qingge's hips.

And he *still* hadn't bothered to put on a fucking shirt.

"Feeling better?" Shen Yuan choked.

Liu Qingge's stomach growled. He nodded. "What's for dinner?"

Chapter 11: Unbearable

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time continued onward.

Shen Yuan didn't seem to know what to do with Liu Qingge, so he was often left to his own devices. After being chided for escaping to the park without warning, Liu Qingge rarely left the house unless Shen Yuan went somewhere. Even then, running an errand with his host felt awkward and stilted.

So, he stayed at the apartment. He meditated, turned up his nose in disgust at Shen Yuan's unwashed dishes and meditated some more. Sometimes he would observe Shen Yuan control tiny people and creatures on his magic box to make the characters fight. Their qi was indescribable. As strong as he was, Liu Qingge could only dream of obtaining such a power.

The downside was that these miniature people died quite frequently. Even all that qi couldn't save them. But Shen Yuan was some kind of god, and could easily resurrect them with one twitch of his index finger. Maybe if his host had some sort of strategy that wasn't just offense, he could save more of his soldiers.

Liu Qingge, as a War God, felt qualified to suggest a strategy.

"Shut up and let me play," Shen Yuan had grumbled. He then purposefully did the opposite as Liu Qingge suggested and killed his own army.

How juvenile.

If he had the time, Shen Yuan would lead these souls into endless battles and wars for hours on end. Only when Liu Qingge's eyes began to burn from staring at the glowing box did Shen Yuan remember he had a guest. Then he would cough and suggest they watch a 'movie' instead.

When the 'movie' ended up being another glowing box, Liu Qingge huffed and walked away. He would rather be unbearably bored than expose his eyes to more pain and discomfort.

While Shen Yuan slept on the couch, Liu Qingge exercised. Not in the way he liked by any means, Shen Yuan's cramped bedroom left little space for the routines and stretches of which he was most accustomed.

The rest of the days, Liu Qingge was painfully, embarrassingly bored. Never in his life had he been subjected to such suffering.

"If you're so fucking bored," Shen Yuan swiped at the smaller glowing box, not bothering to even look in Liu Qingge's direction, "you can make us dinner."

This small box Liu Qingge hated the most. It took the most of Shen Yuan's time and he always took it with him. If Liu Qingge looked away for a moment, when he looked back, Shen Yuan's nose would nearly be touching the long, flat part of it.

Liu Qingge never took up Shen Yuan on his offer. Why would he need to make a meal when Shen Yuan always managed to call the cooks from wherever they came from right to his front door? They could make *anything* .

And without talking to anyone, Shen Yuan could get goods delivered in record speed. Where was the middleman? It was something Liu Qingge wasn't sure he would ever understand. The small box, a 'phone', Shen Yuan had reminded him, may have had something to do with it, but from the moment he laid eyes on it, he vowed to never ask questions about it. Ignorance was bliss.

Liu Qingge was all meditated out. With the qi deviation lasting ever since he woke up on the cold, hard ground, cultivating felt pointless.

"Here," Shen Yuan tossed a ball of fabric at him.

He had sat in front of the window most of the day, burning hours by watching the sun rise and set. Observing lamps turn off as the morning started and on as the night arrived. Now it was the late afternoon. Shen Yuan had been awake for a few hours.

Liu Qingge didn't appreciate things being thrown at him, but he unfurled the ball. They were like the looser pants he was familiar with, only an odd texture and…significantly shorter in length.

"Put 'em on." Shen Yuan slid his shoes on his feet and waited in the entrance.

It was suspicious. Usually, Shen Yuan would make a big deal about needing to run errands and explicitly say what was happening. Now, he was being secretive. "Why?"

The man made a big show of rolling his eyes. "Because I told you to."

His behaviour was extraordinarily rude. Rarely in his life had Liu Qingge been presented with the audacity of this nobody. As far as he knew, he had no title, no employment, and no friends.

Liu Qingge did as he was told anyway. He stood from his cross-legged position and unbuttoned his pants. Before he could tug them down far, Shen Yuan squawked.

"For *fuck's sake* , not in here?! Go to the bedroom!" Like a child, he covered his eyes and splotchy cheeks with his hands.

The reaction was worth smiling over. Shen Yuan's juvenile and immature attitude really could be amusing when it wasn't annoying or inconvenient.

Liu Qingge didn't puzzle over the shorter pants for long once he closed the bedroom door behind him, just put them on as he normally would.

“Dude,” Shen Yuan said when Liu Qingge joined him in the entrance. Again, with the informalities! “Where are your shorts?”

Where? Well, where they should be. Liu Qingge looked down to the lumpy mess under his long pants. “They’re here.”

A beat of silence.

“Liu Qingge, you *idiot*!”

What did he do wrong this time? Why was Shen Yuan always mad at him?

“Take off the fucking pants.” He approached with a speed Liu Qingge wouldn’t have expected from the man who sat down nearly the whole day with a shrimp-like posture. His thin and frail body didn’t seem capable of moving at such a speed. His hands wrestled with the button and started to tug the pants down.

How indecent! “Unhand me!” Liu Qingge cried, aghast. “I’ll do it myself.” He willed the burning in his cheeks to fade away at the feeling of the man’s hands on his waist.

It was humiliating stepping out into something more revealing in front of someone he hardly knew. Granted, Shen Yuan had nursed him back to health after that particularly-difficult qi deviation stunt, but that was different. He didn’t like to dwell on it too long. That was another humiliating moment of weakness he’d rather forget.

When the pants dropped to the floor, Liu Qingge was left standing in the shorter ones. Shen Yuan’s eyes lingered on Liu Qingge’s thighs before he coughed into his fist and faced the doorway. He did his best to not attempt covering himself up. Besides, his host wore something similar all the time.

No one paid him a second glance when they stepped outside. The shorter pants, shorts, blended in with the rest of the city’s attire. He still felt horribly uncomfortable. “Can I go back and get Cheng L—”

“No, absolutely not.”

There was that idea shot down. Liu Qingge clenched his fists but bit his tongue. If he started a fight with Shen Yuan in public, which he would win *easily* , those goons from the park a while ago would hound him until they took him to who knows where.

“Where are we going?” Liu Qingge’s eyes scanned the crowds agitatedly.

Shen Yuan scoffed. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Yes? He would? “I don’t like surprises.” He rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck from side to side.

“God, you look like a mafia member when you do that. And chill out, you’ll like it, I promise.” Shen Yuan shot him a smile less reassuring and more teasing. His eyes glinted behind the glass of his frames.

Lightning must have shot through the sky and straight into his chest because his heart jolted to a stop. Those mischievous eyes as Shen Yuan looked up to Liu Qingge was the spitting image of the Peak Lord of Qing Jing.

And it terrified him.

Who was this man? That haughty look so effortlessly matched that of Shen Qingqiu.

It was nothing. It had to be. This was so far into the future that there was no chance.

“Woah,” Shen Yuan stopped in his tracks, facing Liu Qingge. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost. Everything good?”

Maybe he *had* seen a ghost. “I’m…fine.”

Shen Yuan shot him one more confused look before they continued walking.

It wasn’t long before the two arrived at their location.

“You’re lucky there’s one so close to us.”

Us . “What’s so close?” The building in front of them made no sense. It looked like all the rest.

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes again. How many times had he done that now? It was starting to grate on Liu Qingge’s very fried nerves. He led them inside. The doors parted automatically, as if anticipating their presence. When Liu Qingge checked, he saw no doormen opening them. It just got stranger and stranger.

Liu Qingge took in the tall ceilings, observed the loud clanging of metal on metal, the grunts of men working hard…

“Here’s a gym membership for you.” Shen Yuan unexpectedly tossed a small and light square in his direction. Liu Qingge caught it masterfully.

A gym… Of course. He saw the interior with new eyes. The floors were lightly padded and slightly springy, perfect for overthrowing opponents and practicing agility. There were large bags filled with sand hanging from the ceilings where burly men threw punches. A ring was sectioned off in the middle of the floor for sparring. There was a larger section lined with weights, wooden swords, and mirrors.

And everyone looked like him. They wore the revealing shorts, some men even opted to shed their shirts and appear topless. Sweat glistened along the backs of necks and trickled down bare shoulders. The musk reminded him of *home* .

Liu Qingge smiled.

“What’s this?” Shen Yuan asked. “The stone-faced Liu Qingge knows how to smile?”

In an instant, his smile dropped to a dramatic scowl. Of *course* he smiled. How absurd it was for Shen Yuan to draw attention to it.

Shen Yuan pouted. “Such a shame. You’re so cute when you smile, you should do it more often.” He winked.

Winked . Against his will, Liu Qingge’s face burned with heat. Not only that, he could feel the flush climbing up his ears and tingling at his throat. In the mirrors, he caught a glimpse of his bright red cheeks. He glared at the teaser.

By then, Shen Yuan turned away as if he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary. “Shall we check it out?”

They surveyed the building together, Shen Yuan pointing out places of interest and commenting on how to use the odd structures that looked more like torture devices. How a man who looked like he had never exercised a day in his life knew about such items was beyond Liu Qingge.

While they toured, Liu Qingge felt his heart thundering in his chest. It was almost… excitement. Hope, if he dared to go that far.

But that was disgusting.

They made their way back to the entrance.

“Well?” Shen Yuan lilted. He stood expectantly in front of him, hands clasped behind his back. “Do you know how to find your way back? Can I leave you here so you can stop being so annoyingly bored?”

Liu Qingge nodded, unsure of what to say.

Shen Yuan stared at him a moment longer before heaving a sigh. “Have fun then, come back whenever you’re ready, but don’t be out too late.” He turned to leave.

“Wait—” Liu Qingge said. What surprised him was that his hand moved of its own volition, cupping Shen Yuan’s shoulder. He yanked back like Shen Yuan was made of fire. He took a breath.

Shen Yuan blinked.

Right. He had to keep speaking now. Ugh… how could he say it? Liu Qingge swallowed and looked away. Meeting Shen Yuan’s eyes would be too difficult. “…Thank you.”

Fortunately, Shen Yuan seemed unperturbed by the thanks. “I got you, dude.” He whacked Liu Qingge on his bicep. It felt like someone had grazed his arm with a sheet of parchment. This man was seriously weak.

Liu Qingge returned the odd gesture, socking Shen Yuan on his scrawny little arm. The man yelped in pain. “What was that for?!”

Despite his better judgement, Liu Qingge smiled again. “Don’t give what you can’t take, Shen Yuan.”

When Shen Yuan left, he turned around one last time to wave through the glass. Before Liu Qingge could consider waving back in such a childlike fashion, Shen Yuan had disappeared.

Fine. Now he wouldn’t be so horribly bored and dependent on Shen Yuan for entertainment.

Liu Qingge breathed in the space. He walked to the long wall and selected a wooden sword. These were ones children played with if they dreamed of becoming cultivators. They were inferior to Cheng Luan. But it was the most satisfied he had felt in a long time.

Liu Qingge approached a weighted bag, took his stance, and swung.

Chapter End Notes

spoiler: Shen Yuan only knows how to work some of the equipment because his algorithm is filled with alpha men and gym bros

Chapter 12: Culture

Chapter Notes

> I'M READING THE COMMENTS AND WHY DOES EVERYONE THINK THAT LIU QINGGE IS GONNA TRASH THE GYM HAVE YE NO FAITH???????/
>
> J and I were killing ourselves laughing at each new comment that talked about Shen Yuan having to pay damages or the gym being left in shambles once Liu Qingge was done with it..... do y'all share the same braincell?? (affectionate)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liu Qingge was satisfied. Spending time at the gym had filled him with purpose, motivation. He finally felt the ripple of his muscles harden and strengthen after he'd gotten soft from a few weeks of inactivity.

He felt full of *life* again.

A few of the trainers had taken notice in Liu Qingge's extraordinary fighting abilities and challenged him to spar. They didn't stand a chance.

But the feeling of dodging, kicking, and punching was cathartic. There were pathetic rules about 'tapping out' that Liu Qingge may or may not have ignored the first few times. He got scolded. The Peak Lord wasn't used to accepting a forfeit. His own disciples were beat within an inch of their lives or until they successfully landed a punch.

This rule was a little cowardly, but Liu Qingge found great pleasure in watching the grown men writhe and struggle as he pinned them to the mats. Those pats on his bicep were signs of victory.

Sure, the workers had to remind him that the building was closing on more than one occasion. But where else could he go?

Shen Yuan's apartment was his only other option. Liu Qingge didn't want to risk getting lost and interrogated by buffoons in the park again. Not without Shen Yuan there to talk some sense into them. Unfortunately, Liu Qingge knew himself too well in that if he saw those faces ever again, he would smack some sense into them. It wouldn't bode well.

But the apartment only reminded Liu Qingge of his prison in this confusing world. He'd almost come to terms that there was nothing more he could do to escape it. It deeply unsettled him. Everything he knew, everything he *thought* he knew, was unfamiliar and inappropriate for surviving in this landscape. As much as he hated to admit it, he relied on the kindness and generosity of Shen Yuan to keep him sane.

And Shen Yuan introducing this training gym to him was what kept him sane the most.

Each night when he came back from a full day of training and exercising, he would run a steamy bath and take extra care to stretch and massage his limbs under the water. While he loved the smell of a hard day's work, the feel of exhausted and used muscles, he washed himself clean with Shen Yuan's fragrant soap and lathered his long hair to freshness.

Eat, train, sleep, repeat.

The cycle was addicting to Liu Qingge. And yet it didn't completely get him out of the anxiety that wrapped around his brain. He needed further distractions from what he had left behind back in… his world.

Those days where the gym was closed, or where Liu Qingge's body was simply too drained were the worst. He would sit in front of the windows, watching the futuristic world pass by before his eyes. He would be a husk of the Peak Lord he used to be.

Shen Yuan would hover, offering tea and coughing awkwardly to fill the space. When he gave up on trying to make Liu Qingge feel better, he would play those infuriating war games on his special box and then order food for them to eat. They would sit across from each other at the table, not saying a word.

But today it changed.

"I'm sick of you moping around."

Liu Qingge nearly spit out his breakfast. That was extremely rude. He opened his mouth to fire a vicious retort, but Shen Yuan continued.

"We're going on a field trip." He shoved the final spoonful of his milky concoction past his lips. Milk dribbled from the corner of his mouth and Liu Qingge watched Shen Yuan's tongue dart out to lick it away. It left him with a funny feeling in his gut.

Working in the fields? It was humbling work, but physical labour was what Liu Qingge needed to feel healthy. "What are we harvesting?"

Shen Yuan stared at him as if he had suggested assassinating the emperor. Realization finally dawned on his face. "What? God, no, we're not going *to the fields* , we're going to explore the city a little bit."

Oh. That sounded fine. "What about the gym?"

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes. "Take a *break* from the gym, you brute. There's more to do besides exercise."

Liu Qingge didn't much appreciate being called a brute, but he owed Shen Yuan for showing him the gym in the first place. He would let it slide this once. The thought of taking a day off from exercising and training if he didn't have to because of external reasons made him shift in his seat.

“Go put on your nice clothes.”

That was subjective. “The ones you got me, or—”

“ *Yes* , the ones I got you.” Shen Yuan dumped his bowl into the wash basin unceremoniously. He himself hardly looked ready to face the day. “Let me grab my own clothes first and then you go change.”

Shen Yuan disappeared into the bedroom and rummaged around through his drawers before selecting a pile of fabric. He dumped them onto the living area couch and gave Liu Qingge a pointed look.

Liu Qingge stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. His clothes were folded neatly beside his bed. He didn’t have many articles of clothing to choose from, but based on the weather, he selected a shorter, black tunic with short sleeves and his stiff pants made from the rough material.

He came out from the bedroom only to find Shen Yuan still changing.

His pants were similar to Liu Qingge’s; he wasn’t wearing the stretchy shorts he usually had on. He had yet to put on a top, and Liu Qingge studied the man’s small body. He was frail, almost alarmingly so. Skinny arms and visible ribs, but a little bit of softness around his belly. Liu Qingge suddenly had a strong urge to protect him.

Shen Yuan pulled a short-sleeved top over his head. His glasses were knocked askew, but he quickly fixed them, a blush tinging his cheeks. “Let’s go.”

They stood in the entrance, pulling on their shoes.

Before Shen Yuan turned the door handle, Liu Qingge stared at him. Dare he ask it? “Can I take Ch—”

“ *Oh my god* ,” Shen Yuan groaned to the sky. “ *Fine,* yes, take your fucking sword along, what could *possibly* go wrong!”

Liu Qingge bit back a grin of delight. Finally! He would feel immensely more comfortable with Cheng Luan resting on his hip, as it ought to. Even though the buzzing of qi was absent, the weight of the sword reminded him that he had control.

Shen Yuan didn’t lead Liu Qingge far down the streets near his home, instead, he took them down a windy set of stairs packed with people rushing through. Liu Qingge’s guard instantly rose at the large crowds pushing each other and weaving between bodies to hurry on their way.

“This way,” Shen Yuan tugged on Liu Qingge’s wrist to guide him towards a box that was virtually the height of Shen Yuan himself. It was similar to the box Shen Yuan had back in his bedroom, with the glow that hurt Liu Qingge’s eyes.

While Shen Yuan worked with the confusing box, Liu Qingge surveyed his surroundings. They appeared to be in some kind of tunnel system that ran under the city. It was very

intentional, with tiles covering the floors, ceiling, and walls. The tunnels seemed to stretch on forever in every direction. He could get lost here.

Somehow, the device deposited a minuscule roll of paper. Shen Yuan thrust it into Liu Qingge's palm. "Don't lose it," he said.

Liu Qingge nodded. It sounded important.

They pushed past a metal fence that mysteriously recognized their slips of paper. Liu Qingge had *so* many questions, but he hated appearing ignorant and decided he would rather bite his tongue. They stomped down some more steps deeper into the intentional cave system.

A loud rumble shook the walls and the very ground under Liu Qingge's feet. The tunnel was caving in! "We need to leave," he told Shen Yuan urgently.

But the man laughed in his face. "We're fine, it's just the subway."

That meant nothing to him. Getting laughed at meant something a little more. Embarrassment flared up in his gut.

Shen Yuan saw something, some hulking mass. "That's our ride!" He scuttled down the stairs even faster and all Liu Qingge could do was follow.

The beast was no demon Liu Qingge had ever seen. It didn't seem to have eyes, or any kind of face, but its speed was unmatched. And worse yet, people entered and exited the beast's insides!

"I'm not going near that thing." He ground out through his teeth.

"You gotta." Shen Yuan tugged Liu Qingge's wrist again to pull him inside.

It felt like a thousand other people crammed into the container as well. Their bodies quickly became squished against the internal wall of the beast.

A man jabbed his elbow into Shen Yuan's stomach carelessly. Shen Yuan flinched and shrunk inwards. He looked so small.

Liu Qingge remembered Shen Yuan's sickly-looking body in the living room. " *Back away* ," he hissed to the man pushing Shen Yuan against the door of the travelling mechanism. The man shot him a dirty look, but did as instructed.

"Woah," Shen Yuan laughed a little nervously. "Chill, it's not that deep."

There were too many people here. Shen Yuan could easily get crushed between the bodies. Liu Qingge stood with his back to the growing crowd, arms bracing himself beside Shen Yuan's head. As more people forced their way inside, Liu Qingge's chest was nearly flush with Shen Yuan's. Only a small sliver of space was between them.

Even while the carriage rattled and shook, Liu Qingge could hear Shen Yuan's shaky breathing just below him. Did the shifting of the carriage scare him? Was the crowd too

overwhelming?

Shen Yuan asked him instead: “Are you doing okay?”

Liu Qingge blinked. He wasn’t expecting that.

The container jostled, and Shen Yuan pressed a hand against Liu Qingge’s chest to steady himself. Liu Qingge’s heart thundered under his burning palm.

Music rang through the compartment. Was there a performance happening here?

“This is our stop,” Shen Yuan squeaked. He pushed Liu Qingge in the direction of the doorway.

Finally, when they stepped out, Liu Qingge felt as if he could breathe again. It was still crowded here, but there was at least some air flow instead of stale air that smelled of numerous bodies squeezed tightly together.

Shen Yuan had smelled fine, though.

Liu Qingge squinted into the bright light of day as they exited the tunnel through the stairs. Though there weren’t many steps, Shen Yuan wheezed with exertion.

They appeared to have entered an extremely large courtyard, filled with people, stalls, that prefaced a massive palace that rivaled that of all Liu Qingge had ever seen. It was incredibly ornate and in excellent condition; pillars carved from jade shone in the sunshine, not a stone in the path leading up to the entrance was out of place.

Aside from the clamor and noise of the foreign world around him, Liu Qingge finally felt as if he were back at home.

“This way,” Shen Yuan said. A small smile danced at the corners of his lips. He had been watching him, Liu Qingge realized.

He followed dutifully.

Shen Yuan led him somewhere not far from the view of the grand palace. It was a small shop filled with racks of colourful clothing. Instantly, his stomach turned at the idea of shopping again, after his humiliating experience from last time. He didn’t need more clothes.

A store clerk quickly greeted them.

“We want to get fitted in historical costumes,” Shen Yuan explained.

Historical ?

The clerk nodded and whisked them both away to the back of the store. She pushed Shen Yuan onto a pedestal and measured him with astonishing efficiency. She asked about colours and preferences, and then disappeared amidst the stuffed racks.

A different clerk did the same to Liu Qingge. He tried not to flinch at the prodding hands measuring him, and stuttered like a fool when answering the questions about his preferences. Wasn't it obvious? Something moveable, and in grey and white, the signature colours of Bai Zhan Peak.

The clerk didn't seem to know Bai Zhan Peak, but said they would see what they could do.

How far from the peaks were they? Cang Qiong Mountain was very reputable. Maybe such a humble servant like this clerk was not educated to know those who helped protect the streets from unruly demons. What a shame.

With two piles of clothes later, Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge were shoved into separate dressing rooms.

Liu Qingge finally had a chance to look at what he'd been given. His heart throbbed and ached at the sight. Here, in his arms, were signs of home. This 'historical' clothing was what he was most familiar with. Why hadn't Shen Yuan taken him here when he needed new clothes?

The process was methodical and practiced as he slid the clothing on. Strings and ribbons were tied, sleeves were wrapped, and the pants flowed loosely down his legs. While being in these clothes felt good, the quality was less than subpar. Liu Qingge would never have frequented such an establishment that sold scratchy and unpleasant textures like this. The colours were a bit too bright for the Bai Zhan Peak, but they were the closest thing he had to home.

"Ugh," Shen Yuan's groan was muffled as he fumbled around in the stall next to Liu Qingge. "How do you get this on every day?"

How people here wore the long and starchy *pants* every day was beyond him. Liu Qingge huffed and stormed into Shen Yuan's dressing room.

Compared to the lights in the larger store the two visited, it was dim and even more cramped here. Only a flimsy curtain separated them from the rest of the world.

Shen Yuan squealed, clutching his clothes to his bare chest. "What are you doing?! Are you a pervert?"

Now it was Liu Qingge's turn to roll his eyes. "I'm helping," he growled. "You're doing it all wrong." *So dramatic* , he thought, whipping Shen Yuan around and helping him guide his arms through the sleeves.

Shen Yuan shivered when Liu Qingge's fingers touched the skin on his shoulders and spine as he tied the back of the undershirt. He frowned. Was he getting sick?

Liu Qingge helped with the overshirt and was about to fasten the belt around Shen Yuan's waist when he started swatting him away.

"I-I got it now, get the fuck out!"

Ugh, again with the drama.

The same clerk as earlier guided Liu Qingge to a stack of small boxes that could hold his clothes until he was finished wearing his traditional garments. He couldn't understand why he would want those other clothes back, but did as he was told.

He didn't have to wait long before Shen Yuan came out of his dressing room.

Oh.

Liu Qingge wasn't sure how to feel.

Despite the cheap feeling of the material, Shen Yuan looked noble dressed in gold and green. His robes skimmed the ground as he walked. While his body was dressed in formal wear, his nervous smile made him appear younger than he actually must have been.

The robes suited him. Perhaps he felt uncomfortable in them, but Liu Qingge could see a regality and majesty the man never held before. What was he doing in those shorts when he could be dressing like this?

If the smile was confident, all he needed was a fan…

And then it would be as if Shen Qingqiu, not Shen Yuan, was standing in front of him.

No, he didn't need those things. Shen Yuan alone in the clothes Liu Qingge was so familiar with stirred something dormant in his chest. He didn't want to admit it, and he never would, to Shen Yuan's face, but regardless of Shen Yuan's scrawny appearance and sickly demeanor, he looked good.

But Liu Qingge couldn't continue to ignore the obvious. Those glittering eyes, the colour of his hair, the length of his fingers and the dramatic mannerisms were too recognizable to disregard.

He was staring into the eyes of Shen Qingqiu, whether Shen Yuan himself knew it or not.

"What's wrong? Is everything okay?" Shen Qi—Yuan gripped Liu Qingge's sleeve.

Liu Qingge's face must have betrayed him. He couldn't form any words. How could he? He had just been hit with the sickening realization that his host was the very person who encouraged him to consume the stupid Thousand-Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire.

"It's fine," Liu Qingge ground out, yanking his arm back. He could barely hear his words over the sound of blood rushing in his ears.

Shen Yuan swallowed, looking at the ground. His jaw tightened. "Well, I was just trying to make you feel better," he snapped. He stomped out of the shop after dumping his clothes into a box.

Wait—, Liu Qingge wanted to say, but Shen Yuan had already moved on, hands clasped behind his back.

Liu Qingge could hardly focus on the impressive monuments Shen Yuan showed him as they toured the palace grounds in all their grandeur. All he could think about was the nearness and attention provided by Shen Yuan. After explaining a historical artifact or site, he would attempt to gauge Liu Qingge's response by leaning in close and asking teasing questions. His pink tongue would run over the sharp points of his canines as he waited for an answer. When Liu Qingge gave him none, Shen Yuan would roll his eyes and waltz off to the next curio.

The combination of the clothes and the architecture Liu Qingge saw were like a soothing balm applied to raw wounds: he was relieved, but still ached.

It's as if there were a paper-thin layer between realities. Like if he foolishly stretched out his fingers enough, he would breach that barrier and go back to what he knew. To *who* he knew. So close, yet so far.

And when Liu Qingge would begin to feel those inky tendrils of anxiety crawl into his chest, Shen Yuan would catch his eye and nudge him with his elbow. "You're not even paying attention, doof," he would say.

Liu Qingge didn't know what a 'doof' was, but the comments would ground him, no matter how condescending.

Some time later, after touring everything they could, they watched the sun set in their costumes. Liu Qingge would have preferred to be on Bai Zhan with the sounds of nature, but sitting near the river with Shen Yuan was a close second.

"Well?" Shen Yuan yawned. "Did you have fun?"

Fun .

Fun for Liu Qingge was beating disciples and demons to a pulp. It was mastering a new fighting technique. It was watching Cheng Luan make mince meat of enemies. It was drinking alcohol in solitude at dusk.

He grunted. That was all he could manage right now. Shen Yuan could interpret that however he liked, but Liu Qingge knew what the answer was, he just didn't want to admit it.

Shen Yuan returned his gaze to the skyline, seemingly content.

Liu Qingge couldn't tear his eyes away. The slope of his nose, the shape of his mouth, every delicate curve of his face just reminded him of what he never had.

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. What could he possibly say?

Instead, he dug his fingernails into his palms, willing them to bleed. He would have to ignore whatever was stirring in his stomach for as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

check out art for this chapter (by me) here!

Chapter 13: Embers

Chapter Summary

> Or, 3 times Shen Yuan caught Liu Qingge staring, and the one time Shen Yuan stared back.

Chapter Notes

> I know this is supposed to be 5+1 but who has the time or energy to think of five whole things??

#1

Shen Yuan's daily routine went something like this: wake up when he felt like it, make toast or order in breakfast (or lunch, if it was past 2pm), play computer games, and finally, to end the night, he would scroll through chapters of shitty web novels and let the authors know what he thought of them. On top of flaming *Proud Immortal Demon Way* , he would search for some other poorly-written, plot hole-riddled piece of text written by an inexperienced teenager to roast to smithereens on his public forums.

Now, Shen Yuan's routine looked like this: wake up with a sore neck and back from yet another night on the couch, listen to his Peak Lord roommate Liu Qingge clatter around as he gets ready for a few hours at the gym, feel embarrassed about the dirty dishes in the sink that he didn't clean up last night, then bum around on his phone and computer until Liu Qingge came home.

Sometimes he felt like a pathetic housewife moping and pacing until her husband returned from the war or some shit, and other times he was grateful to have his room back.

But then Liu Qingge *would* come home and they would spend an awkward afternoon and evening in each other's presence.

When Shen Yuan couldn't be bothered to entertain the grown-ass man in his apartment, he would resort to his computer games. After some time, Liu Qingge would pull up a chair from the dining room table and sit beside Shen Yuan at his computer desk, their elbows close, but never touching. The electricity between bodies not-quite touching was almost more unbearable than being touched in general.

Liu Qingge had caught onto the game's rules now. Shen Yuan still found it incredibly annoying when he suggested strategies, but when he implemented a few, he found his team growing in strength and skill.

Ugh. Of *course* this loser was right.

There were even times he woke Shen Yuan early from his restless slumber with a sheet of paper full of strategic scribbles. His methods of waking Shen Yuan up were usually quite creative; he would get poked with Liu Qingge's toe, a pillow would be smothered over his face, Liu Qingge would just repeat his name until he finally woke up, the list went on. He must've learned these methods from a bootcamp or his disciple-training, if that was a real thing.

Today was no different; they were huddled around the dual monitors in Shen Yuan's bedroom, elbows resting on the table. Liu Qingge blinked hard at the blue light, but he watched every movement.

When Shen Yuan used a potion or applied a specific move, Liu Qingge would tsk. If he used a turn to swap weapons, Liu Qingge would shake his head.

"Why don't *you* play, then?" Shen Yuan sighed, pushing the mouse to his roommate.

Liu Qingge stared at it like it had a disease. "I do not know how."

Shen Yuan's head hurt from how aggressively he rolled his eyes into the back of his skull. "Well for *not knowing* you sure stick your nose in where it doesn't belong!"

Liu Qingge sniffed and leaned back in his chair. "Fine, I will simply observe."

Yeah right, Shen Yuan thought, but he continued playing.

Liu Qingge was true to his word. He stopped the yapping and just watched.

The problem was, Liu Qingge wasn't observing the game as he had implied. No, his eyes were locked onto Shen Yuan's every twitch of his mouse, every flinch of his pointer finger. From Shen Yuan's peripherals, he could see Liu Qingge's head tilt as he studied him. He even dared to lean closer to Shen Yuan's chair. If he moved a few centimeters forward, Shen Yuan was sure he would be able to feel Liu Qingge's hot breath on his cheek.

What the fuck was he staring for? And so intently? Shen Yuan didn't want to meet Liu Qingge's stare in case he didn't back down from the eye contact and then they would be locked in an extremely-awkward and uncomfortably-homoerotic stare down.

Sweat beaded on Shen Yuan's neck. "A-are you even watching the game?"

"Yes," Liu Qingge answered, not moving his head at all. Unless he had eyes popping out from his ears, Shen Yuan had a *really* hard time believing him.

Fine. He wouldn't challenge him, not when he still couldn't be completely sure if Cheng Luan would be whipped out if he said something Liu Qingge didn't like.

He'd ignore it for now.

#2

While initially reluctant, Shen Yuan finally managed to convince Liu Qingge to watch movies. TV shows, not yet, but the time would come.

At first, Liu Qingge would simply poke his head around the TV to see what was on screen, but he would leave shortly after to do who-knows-what. Probably go to the gym. Maybe attempt to meditate in Shen Yuan's room if he could tune out the blasting noises from the speakers.

But occasionally he would stand by the couch with his arms crossed like an old father refusing to admit he was watching the screen. If Shen Yuan acknowledged it, in an old father way, Liu Qingge would hmph and do something else.

Shen Yuan didn't mind that part, but if Liu Qingge stood behind the couch and watched for over ten minutes then Shen Yuan started getting twitchy. Liu Qingge's avoidance of resting made him anxious for the man to take a fucking seat. Watching a film wouldn't corrupt his mind, or anything.

It started when Shen Yuan watched whatever he wanted. Usually those were fantasy dramas or old rom-coms he could make fun of. Liu Qingge would give him a serious side eye if he critiqued the show and its plot a little too loudly.

And sometimes Shen Yuan watched action films with either epic or poorly-done fight scenes. For these ones Liu Qingge would stick around to observe the movements on screen.

And then…he sat down!

Liu Qingge stoically watched the punches fly across the screen. When he was really into it, he would jolt and lean as if dodging the punches and kicks himself.

"You know," Shen Yuan would joke, "they're not actually aiming for *you* ."

Liu Qingge scowled. That was usually enough to get him to stop watching, but the more Shen Yuan watched, the longer Liu Qingge stayed.

He eventually made it through his first movie from start to finish.

"Well?" Shen Yuan yawned and stretched. Liu Qingge's eyes tracked the movement of the hem of his shirt rising to his bellybutton. "What did you think?"

The Peak Lord blinked. "Of what?" It could have been the residual light from the TV screen, but Liu Qingge's ears may have turned pink.

"The film, idiot."

His nose wrinkled. "It was entertaining."

There was a pause, and then Shen Yuan realized that was it. That was his whole review. "That's it." He said, more in disbelief than as an actual question.

"The fighting was unrealistic."

Shen Yuan bit back a smile. He hugged a pillow to his stomach and faced Liu Qingge on the couch. His tucked knees almost touched Liu Qingge's arm. This was the review he wanted. He *knew* Liu Qingge would have *opinions* about the fight scenes. "Oh? Tell me more."

Liu Qingge seemed uncomfortable with having to speak more than necessary, but he obliged. "First of all, no one can do that many back flips in rapid succession while being attacked. Secondly, the weapons used were inappropriate for the style of fighting used. Again, with the weapons, they were—"

Shen Yuan listened to him rage. Liu Qingge pulled out receipts for his points, using his fingers to count the ways. Shen Yuan didn't know how long he had ranted about his qualms before Liu Qingge finally coughed into his fist.

"But that's beside the point."

It was fun seeing this riled-up side of Liu Qingge. "What's the point, then?" Shen Yuan rested his head on the cushions of the couch.

Liu Qingge paused, choosing his words. "I liked it."

Shen Yuan burst into laughter, enjoying watching Liu Qingge shift in his seat and frown deeper at his reaction. "We'll watch one of mine sometime, I really want to hear what you have to say about *that* ."

And that they did.

Shen Yuan selected his favourite romantic comedy to hate from the streaming service on his TV. Liu Qingge sat beside him on the couch a safe distance apart. He just got out of the bath, so a towel lay draped over his bare shoulders while he sat in basketball shorts that's fabric strained against the muscles of his thighs.

Not that Shen Yuan noticed, though.

Liu Qingge watched the movie in silence while Shen Yuan dropped snide comments. He was vaguely aware of Liu Qingge's unwavering gaze on him while the film played throughout.

Finally, the lovers on screen shared a passionate embrace, a loving kiss.

While the music swelled, Shen Yuan felt the familiar tightening in his belly that he pretended to ignore. The pillow in his lap got crushed under his curling fingertips.

The credits rolled.

"What about that one?" Shen Yuan was nonchalant. He was an expert at masking how he truly felt.

Liu Qingge hadn't moved an inch—likely a product of his many years of cultivation practice—and he didn't say anything for a few moments. His features, usually hard and closed off were soft. Maybe the movie warmed him up somehow. "You seemed to like it."

Now it was Shen Yuan's turn to flush angrily. Heat slithered up his throat and settled on his cheeks. "It's not about me, you're supposed to have opinions."

Liu Qingge hummed, a low rumble that Shen Yuan felt rattle his bones. "I have no opinions. I liked your reactions to it."

Shen Yuan swallowed loudly and then hacked. He didn't want to think about what that meant. He wanted Liu Qingge to close his goddamn eyes and never look at him ever again in case he was perceived. "Go to bed, you fucking weirdo."

#3

Another thing Shen Yuan had implemented was the decision to attempt making dinners for the two of them. On his parents' monthly allowance, it was getting hard for Shen Yuan to provide for two adults instead of his usual one. And Liu Qingge liked vegetables which always cost more than the junk food Shen Yuan preferred.

When Liu Qingge wasn't at the gym, he would eagerly tag along on Shen Yuan's grocery shopping exploits. He would make sure to look at every product in every aisle and read every label to know what every single thing was and how to use it. He would smell each fruit and vegetable and put only the ones he deemed acceptable into Shen Yuan's cart.

Somehow, they would always leave the grocery store with more vegetables than Shen Yuan had ever touched in his life and more rice grains he could ever eat.

But fuck it, Shen Yuan was up for the challenge.

Delusion and overconfidence were his teachers in the kitchen. Did Shen Yuan know there were a plethora of video tutorials on how to cook online? Sure! But why would he watch those when he could be a *chef* and *experiment* in the kitchen?

This usually never turned out well.

Simple green beans turned into green beans soaked in grapefruit juices; a potato casserole was drowning in sugar instead of salt; he forgot to oil his pans and had to get Liu Qingge to help scrape off the crusted-on remnants of whatever he was struggling to make.

Liu Qingge would wordlessly watch as Shen Yuan did this, of course, never offering to help unless explicitly asked. Shen Yuan was some kind of servant to him, that ungrateful bastard. And his staring would only pressure Shen Yuan more. If he was nervous about trying a new recipe that actually required the stove instead of the microwave, he was even more so with Liu Qingge breathing down his neck.

He would situate himself on one of the island's stools, unabashedly staring Shen Yuan down while he read a recipe on his phone or flipped through one of his mother's cookbooks. Those were just guides, of course, not rules.

But Liu Qingge never reacted, either. His stare was blank and incapable of being read. Whatever was going on in that ancient brain of his, Shen Yuan had no clue.

He tried to have meals prepared by the time Liu Qingge came home from the gym like a good fucking housewife (shudder), but often Liu Qingge would return when Shen Yuan was struggling to chop vegetables or unnecessarily dirtying four more pots than he needed. Sometimes Liu Qingge would scoff at the sight, or he would wordlessly go change from his sweaty clothes and then return to his perch by the island.

Today, Shen Yuan was attempting to make a stir fry of the vegetables Liu Qingge had selected the previous week. He lay them, unwashed, on the chopping board, struggling to get a good grip on the vegetable while slicing it consistently thin. While TV chefs made it look easy, Shen Yuan suffered in reality.

"Welcome back," he said when he heard the entrance door open. Liu Qingge didn't respond, he usually didn't.

He did as his schedule allowed, closing the bedroom door behind him to change from his gym clothes. Like a good boy, he tossed his dirty ones in the hamper when he came back out.

"I'm making stir fry," Shen Yuan explained even though he didn't have to.

Liu Qingge grunted.

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes, but while doing so, brought the knife down onto his fingertip.

Blood gushed out onto the chopped vegetables and the world around him spun—

No, absolutely not. It was a tiny cut, barely bleeding, but enough to make Shen Yuan cry out in shock. He inspected the minuscule wound, but as soon after he made the noise, Liu Qingge flew to his side, taking Shen Yuan's hand in his.

Liu Qingge's fingertips were callused and warm. Unexpectedly warm. Their heat flowed through Shen Yuan's body and travelled to his face.

"Foolish," he muttered, examining the cut. "Your knife skills are pathetic."

Shen Yuan's finger barely even throbbed. "Wow, thanks. You're so kind."

Liu Qingge glared at him. "You shouldn't be handling sharp weapons if you are not equipped to. It's dangerous."

Okay, this was a little dramatic, even for Liu Qingge. Shen Yuan wanted to protest again, but couldn't find the words to while Liu Qingge still probed his hand, his palm, even up to his elbow checking for cuts.

Shen Yuan tried to twist his arm from Liu Qingge's grip, but he was obviously stronger.

"Stay still," he growled.

Shen Yuan pursed his lips but did as he was told in case Liu Qingge yanked his whole arm from its socket.

He disappeared to the bathroom returning only a moment later with the first aid kit. How Liu Qingge knew where it was, Shen Yuan didn't know. He fished out a roll of bandages and set them on the counter.

"Dude, just a band-aid will be fine." Shen Yuan reached for the small box containing them. Liu Qingge was being absurd, really. He was making a much bigger deal of this than what it actually was. His hand was swatted away and Liu Qingge over-wrapped a portion of the bandage around his finger. He even secured it along his wrist.

What a waste of bandage. But if Shen Yuan said anything he would break Liu Qingge's little heart, so he bit his tongue.

"You will stay away from the knives."

"Oh yeah? Who's gonna make dinner for you, then?"

Liu Qingge's eyebrows drew low over his eyes. "You're only going to end up killing yourself because you're incompetent. I'll cut the vegetables."

Well, there was no arguing with that determined face.

To prove his point, Liu Qingge practically bodychecked Shen Yuan out of the kitchen and sliced the veggies with infuriating ease.

Even while he chopped vegetables, Liu Qingge continued to scowl at Shen Yuan now sitting in his usual spot at the island.

Liu Qingge never offered to help Shen Yuan and always did so reluctantly when asked, so why was he so determined to take charge now? Were Shen Yuan's knife skills really that embarrassing?

This man was a mystery.

+1

He didn't know if it was on purpose or just a simple mistake; Shen Yuan knew Liu Qingge wasn't the one to seek attention, but while washing Liu Qingge's gym clothes, he spotted a crumpled up brochure in the pocket of his basketball shorts advertising an MMA competition between some of the members of the gym, as well as a few local talents. On the back of the brochure listed the fighters names and sure enough, Liu Qingge lay smack dab in the middle.

But why hadn't he told him? He was almost hurt. If Liu Qingge was making leaps and bounds in the MMA fighting scene, why hadn't he said anything?

Maybe he didn't want Shen Yuan to know. But too bad. Because now he knew and now he was going to drop *everything* (sleeping in and scrolling internet forums) to make it.

And make it he did.

Shen Yuan could see the appeal of fighting. Liu Qingge made it beautiful. He was graceful and swift, easily dodging kicks and punches that flew his way. Amidst the movement, Shen Yuan spotted the beginnings of a grin on Liu Qingge's face.

Shen Yuan swallowed. His heart thudded under his ribs so aggressively he momentarily worried if he should call an ambulance. But these weren't the heart problems he remembered having in childhood. These were the kinds of feelings he got when—when—oh. He'd never had this kind of heart pounding before. It wasn't anxiety, it wasn't overexertion, it was something he didn't even feel when looking at his Luo Binghe pillow. He'd *forgotten* about his Luo Binghe pillow.

Liu Qingge's fist curled and he socked his opponent right in the gut. It seemed to happen in slow motion; Shen Yuan watched the muscles ripple in Liu Qingge's lithe bicep before his arm straightened to land the blow. His opponent flew backwards into the walls of the ring. Just like in the movies, his arms hung limp over the stretchy cables, chin touching his chest.

Oh god. Was he breathing? Was this the kind of power Liu Qingge had?

Shen Yuan returned his gaze to his roommate. Liu Qingge's chest heaved under his compression shirt. Sweat slid from his forehead down to his throat. His abdomen and thighs were tense, ready for another attack. He swiped at his lip with his thumb.

He was impossible *not* to stare at.

Liu Qingge caught Shen Yuan's gaze in the cheering crowd. His eyes widened a fraction before narrowing into something hard and fiery. Pink tinged the tips of his ears. Then he turned his focus to the referee.

The referee gripped Liu Qingge's wrist and raised it to the sky in victory. The small stadium burst into cheers and applause. The girls sitting beside Shen Yuan squealed excitedly and fawned over Liu Qingge's beauty. Shen Yuan had the urge to growl at them like an animal with rabies. They should back the fuck away from Liu Qingge. He'd want nothing to do with them after all.

Shen Yuan joined the throngs of people leaving their seats. When he stepped onto the floor, Liu Qingge materialized there, tall and radiating heat.

He seemed unsure of what to say. "I didn't think you'd come."

Why wouldn't he come? "Of course I did. I know it's important to you." And he looked *really good* while fighting. Maybe Shen Yuan should sign Liu Qingge up for fencing too…

Liu Qingge opened his mouth to say something before he was interrupted by the obnoxious flashing of a camera. Once one camera clicked, others did too, and Shen Yuan was jostled to the back of the growing crowd.

He heard people ask if Liu Qingge needed an agent, a trainer, a sponsor. They asked when he would fight next. They asked for his phone number, for his autograph.

Over the heads of the people, Shen Yuan couldn't see how Liu Qingge was faring. He was probably overwhelmed with the attention and the bright flashes of the camera. He didn't have a media trainer (why would he?) so he would probably end up saying something idiotic that would get him cancelled on the internet.

Maybe Shen Yuan would just have to wait it out until the crowd departed. He could stand near the dingy bathrooms until—

A firm hand latched around Shen Yuan's wrist and yanked him into the rock-solid torso of Liu Qingge. Liu Qingge's arm wrapped around Shen Yuan's waist, holding him close.

What the fuck! Shen Yuan wasn't some pathetic damsel in distress! With all these people watching, they must have seemed like lovers in a passionate embrace. Shen Yuan tried to squirm away, but Liu Qingge was stronger than his slim body let on.

Liu Qingge leaned down to Shen Yuan's ear. "It's dangerous here, you could get hurt." His hot breath tickled Shen Yuan's skin.

Together, they pushed past the people and into the locker room. Liu Qingge released Shen Yuan without a second glance, but Shen Yuan could feel the ghost of their bodies pressing together. Flames licked up his spine.

Normally, Shen Yuan would turn away to watch Liu Qingge change—it'd be *weird* to watch another man strip, after all—but today he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away.

Liu Qingge stripped himself of the compression shirt with astonishing ease; Shen Yuan had never worn one, but they were called compression shirts for a *reason* . Liu Qingge released his hair from its bun and it returned to the state Shen Yuan knew best, that iconic, swinging ponytail. Next, he stepped out of his shorts—

Okay, okay, too much!!

But it was too late. Liu Qingge was watching Shen Yuan now, a towel draped around his neck. "Please stop staring at me," he said. His voice was stern, but pink dusted his sharp cheekbones.

"You stare at me all the time," Shen Yuan countered. He made the mistake of looking downwards—now *that* was the outline of a pillar that must have rivaled Luo Binghe! His own face heated faster than it ever had before.

Liu Qingge looked away, embarrassed at the attention. He was bright red too, all the way from the tips of his ears down to those prominent collarbones. "I-I do *not* ." He scowled

viciously. “I’m going to clean myself. Wait outside.”

Shen Yuan did as he was told. His stupid heart palpitations wouldn’t be able to handle staying in the humid locker room any longer, anyway.

A few moments later, Liu Qingge came out dressed in his jeans and t-shirt. Effortlessly attractive.

Shen Yuan tossed a plastic-wrapped sandwich and a water bottle Liu Qingge’s way. He caught them both with the same hand in an infuriating display of excellent reflexes and athleticism.

“What’s this?” He asked.

“Are you blind? It’s a snack.” Shen Yuan huffed and kicked at the ground with his toe.

Liu Qingge sniffed and devoured the sandwich in three quick bites. He downed the water next, a drop trailing down his prominent Adam’s apple. “Let’s get out of here.” He led the way.

That’s it? No ‘thank you’? God, drawing some gratefulness out of this guy was like trying to get Airplane to write some fucking plot.

It was a lost cause with this guy. Everything Shen Yuan did for him seemed to go unnoticed.

Chapter 14: Kendo

Chapter Notes

i know nothing about kendo don't come for me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was impossible not to notice the sacrifices Shen Yuan had made for Liu Qingge time and time again.

First, taking him in, a total stranger, to nurse his wounds and feed him. To buy him clothing and provide what little entertainment he could for Liu Qingge. Then to save him from precarious situations more than once; to support him with his presence at the MMA match. Liu Qingge would've just called it fighting, but the staff at the gym were *adamant* that they called it MMA. Whatever. He just liked throwing punches.

And knowing that this little man was Shen Qingqiu made everything else so much more confusing.

Attempting to survive in this hellscape of the future was one thing, but living in unbearably close proximity with Shen Qingqiu was another. It was the dream of Liu Qingge from the past. He would have done anything to spend more time with Shen Qingqiu despite his icy façade. The reality was, every time he saw that face, those cunning, cat-like eyes, Liu Qingge's heart thundered in his chest so hard he felt he would split into a jillion tiny pieces.

And maybe that pain would be better than being ignored.

Shen Yuan sat at the table in the kitchen, swiping aimlessly at his phone. He was wearing those absurd, modern-looking earmuffs and nodding his head to silent music. Liu Qingge tried them on once, but the sounds Shen Yuan played were truly heinous.

Despite the shrimp-like posture, Shen Yuan was practically a replica of Shen Qingqiu. How had he not noticed it before? The eyes were catty and mischievous, and if his hair were longer, the colour was the exact same as Shen Qingqiu's. He could only imagine what it felt like under his fingertips. It looked soft and silky. Liu Qingge almost wished Shen Yuan would grow it out so he could run his hands through it. And Shen Yuan's hands, so delicate like Shen Qingqiu's; long, elegant fingers and oval fingernails. His neck a gentle slope, his nose the same.

The mannerisms were a little different at first; Shen Yuan was prone to dramatic outbursts while Shen Qingqiu was more reserved. However, if Shen Yuan was given a fan and a drapey sleeve he may have acted similarly.

He'd studied him an embarrassing amount since he started catching glimpses of Shen Qingqiu in his countenance. Even if they were the same person, it didn't matter because they weren't. Shen Qingqiu was devoted to another, his adoring and disgusting demon husband Luo Binghe. And as far as Liu Qingge knew, Shen Yuan wasn't devoted to anyone.

What did that mean? If he was the Shen Qingqiu of this universe, did that not mean there was a Luo Binghe somewhere for him? He *did* have the vile Luo Binghe shrine in his bedroom. Along with the dreadful pillow. Liu Qingge shuddered at the flash of the image in his mind.

But that was all delusion. A foolish fantasy. Every dream and fleeting thought he had of himself and Shen Qingqiu being together was crushed like a bug underfoot. Why would Shen Yuan be any different?

Ugh. All this thinking was hurting his head. He was performing mental acrobatics to try and think up some reasoning.

He needed some air.

Liu Qingge stood from his spot on the squishy couch that made his lower back ache. Shen Yuan's eyes tracked his movement, but only briefly. "Going out?" He asked.

So indifferent ! Liu Qingge hmphed; not a yes, not a no.

"Don't get lost," Shen Yuan lilted. He glanced at Liu Qingge from the corners of his eyes, a teasing glint brightening them.

A jolt of lightning shot through Liu Qingge's chest. *This man--!* He grimaced and stomped out of the apartment; Cheng Luan secure at his side.

Liu Qingge found himself walking in the direction of the park he *had* got lost in, but now at least he was relatively clear of mind and could pay attention to which path to follow.

He felt as if he should debate the scenario some more, the whole *thing* with Shen Yuan, whatever thing that was, but every time Shen Yuan's well-proportioned face came into his mind, a headache formed at his temples. What else could he do besides ignore it?

The park was more familiar today. And nature was the right choice. It was still packed full of people, but the fresh air and the mere sight of sunshine shining through the gaps in the leaves were comforting. He wasn't the sentimental, poetic type, but nature evoked these feelings in him after being subjected to live in this confusing metal world.

After spotting a spare square of grass, Liu Qingge settled down into his meditative position. He liked to do this to start, get his mind and body in the right place before trying to tune into Cheng Luan. Now it was different, of course, with Cheng Luan emitting no spiritual qi that was either its fault or his.

Miraculously, he was able to establish some sort of distance from thinking of Shen Yuan. He focused on feeling the rays of sun on his cheeks, the breeze passing through the strands of hair in his ponytail.

Time passed. When Liu Qingge cultivated, he was never sure really how much time had gone by, but it was still light outside, only the late afternoon.

He stood from his position and unsheathed his blade inch by inch. Before going through his comforting pattern of moves, he cast a quick glance to look for oblivious people who may get in his way.

Liu Qingge stepped forward, the swinging of the blade cutting through the air.

Again, a quick glance. No one seemed alarmed. A few people stopped to watch, a little impressed.

Just one slice and people were amazed? Wait until they saw what he could *really* do.

He performed a series of movements and steps, Cheng Luan whizzing and singing with each turn. It'd be more satisfying to actually be fighting something, but that would be significantly bloodier and therefore not as family friendly.

A gaggle of small children smiled and laughed at Liu Qingge, rudely pointing with sticky fingers and picking up sticks of their own.

Liu Qingge sneered as he watched the children swing and block with their sticks. If they were on Bai Zhan Peak, they'd be beaten for pointlessly swinging without any care or discipline.

They joined Liu Qingge on his patch of grass. *No!* Mocking the art of swordsmanship was one thing, but intruding on Liu Qingge's personal space and training time was another.

"Is that real?"

Liu Qingge shot three feet into the air. He hadn't even heard the little kid approach. He whipped around and saw a very small girl with two messy pigtails sprouting from the top of her head. Her eyes were wide with wonder.

Liu Qingge huffed. "Of *course* it's real."

Four other kids gathered around him. "Is it heavy?"

What kind of question was that? "No, because—"

"Can I touch it?"

Touch Cheng Luan? Just like that? "This is a *very* sophisticated weapon—"

"Is it sharp?"

"Is it yours?"

"How old is it?"

"How old are *you* ?"

“Where did you get it?”

Screw the demons in his world, all these nosy kids were way worse! He needed to get out of here and *fast* .

Seeing his predicament, parents approached Liu Qingge, tugging at their children’s pudgy wrists. “So sorry,” one apologized. “You’re very talented with the sword. Do you teach kendo?”

Kendo? Liu Qingge didn’t teach anything. He just beat his disciples into being better. Based on these peoples’ smiling faces he could gather that they wouldn’t approve of that teaching method. “I—” He started to say.

“What’s your phone number?” Another parent asked.

Liu Qingge didn’t know what that was.

“Here, I’ll give you mine.” Said a third. They scribbled on a piece of paper and passed it to him.

More parents did the same. “Great idea!”

“Call us if you ever start teaching kendo classes!”

“The kids love you!”

And that’s how Liu Qingge ended up standing in a park holding an assortment of papers, exhausted and disheveled.

He didn’t want to practice anymore, especially not here. It would draw too much attention to himself, and more people would ambush him with pointless and obtrusive questions.

Going to the gym was an option, but it wasn’t outdoors. And since Liu Qingge’s victory at the MMA match, trainers and agents often lingered near the doors to get a chance to talk to him. He could represent *himself* , thank you very much.

Maybe there were other parks, but Liu Qingge begrudgingly knew that he would get lost if he attempted to find and make his way back from one.

Back to Shen Yuan’s it was.

Fortunately, he dodged the families and children from earlier. If they saw him again, for all he knew, they would make him give Cheng Luan to their obnoxious child and force a lesson right then and there.

He would have to ask Shen Yuan what kendo was.

Liu Qingge returned to the door, punching in the numbered code. The lock clicked open. When he stepped inside and removed his shoes, Shen Yuan was on the couch, still glued to his fucking phone.

He tongued his cheek at the sight. Did Shen Yuan do anything all day? What or *who* could possibly keep his attention for that long?

“You’re back.” Shen Yuan said, finally.

Liu Qingge nodded.

Shen Yuan raised his eyebrows. “And chatty as ever, I see.” He dropped the phone, turning those catty eyes to Liu Qingge’s. “How was it?”

“Too many people,” Liu Qingge grunted.

A smile crept up Shen Yuan’s lips.

“What are these for?” Liu Qingge fished in his pockets for the crumpled-up strings of numbers. He dumped them in front of his host on the couch cushions.

Shen Yuan looked at them for one second before bursting into laughter. He clutched his stomach and fell backwards on the cushions, tears beading at the corners of his eyes.

He wheezed for a good few minutes. It wasn’t *that* funny.

“Are these all from *women?* ”

Liu Qingge shifted on his feet. “No.”

“Men too?” He doubled over again in a fit of giggles. His feet swung and kicked in the air in delight. “You’re going to be booked through the next two months with all the dates you have to go on!”

Dates ? *Why did he--* ! If Liu Qingge wasn’t beet red before, he sure was now. Shen Yuan thought these were from suitors! “Not *dates* ,” he sputtered. “Something called kendo.”

Shen Yuan stilled instantly. “What were you doing to get this kind of attention?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “I went to the park to practice with Cheng Luan.”

He hummed, leaning back on the cushions. He stretched his arms over his head, revealing a sliver of tantalizing skin by his belly button. Liu Qingge wanted to run his thumbs along that patch and watch Shen Yuan shiver underneath him. He shook the thought away. “What is kendo?” He asked instead.

Shen Yuan waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “It’s just swordsmanship. Like what you do. Except there’s more armour and rules. Why?”

Liu Qingge huffed. Sounded unnecessary. “Some children saw me practicing—”

Shen Yuan laughed out loud again until he was silenced by Liu Qingge’s glare.

“—so some parents wanted me to teach their children kendo because they were interested in Cheng Luan.” He stroked the hilt of the sword to comfort himself. He didn’t particularly want to slice young children into minuscule pieces, but if they asked one more question about Cheng Luan he wasn’t sure he could keep calm. Cheng Luan was personal. It was *his* .

“So? Show me some moves!”

He wasn’t a circus performer. He didn’t just *show moves* .

But Shen Yuan sat there with wide, expectant eyes. “Fine,” he grumbled. “Just this once.”

He didn’t even need to survey his surroundings before unsheathing Cheng Luan and displaying a complex combination of twirls, dodges, and parries.

When he stopped, the galaxy was in Shen Yuan’s pupils. “That was *so cool* !” He cried, oddly animated.

Liu Qingge grunted. It wasn’t *that* cool. Even so, a little part of him wanted to puff out his chest at the praise.

“Can you teach me some?” Shen Yuan leapt up from the couch, arranging his clothes. He even went so far as to push the couch out of the way, inch by screechy inch.

He scoffed this time. He doubted Shen Yuan could even hold Cheng Luan up with his scrawny arms. Then again, the couch *was* moving even though Shen Yuan squealed with the effort.

And he didn’t give up Cheng Luan to anyone. It was an act of intimacy, handing the sword that chose you to another. If it were filled with qi, Shen Yuan couldn’t do anything with it, but if it was just a sword, maybe it was possible.

As he unsheathed and passed the weapon to an eager Shen Yuan, a thought crossed his mind.

He wouldn’t lend this to Shen Qingqiu. If Shen Qingqiu asked, Liu Qingge would scoff and tell him to figure out the weapon situation on his own. Before he rescued him in the LingXi Cave, Liu Qingge worried that Shen Qingqiu would have just stabbed him given the opportunity. And what better irony than with his own weapon?

But Shen Yuan wasn’t Shen Qingqiu no matter the similarities. He was the Shen Qingqiu of here, but at the end of the day, he was still Shen Yuan.

This little guy couldn’t stab him if he tried. And why would he try?

He snapped out of his thoughts to check Shen Yuan’s stance. Pathetic, as he anticipated. He grabbed an apple from the countertop. “Your legs need to be further apart.” He took a chunk from the fruit with his teeth.

Shen Yuan shuffled accordingly. It still didn’t look good.

“Bend your knees.”

Shen Yuan complied, knees turning in awkwardly.

Hopeless . Liu Qingge abandoned his fruit and joined Shen Yuan in the living space. He stood behind him, hands guiding his shoulders. “Like this,” he mumbled, his own voice low and dark. He knocked Shen Yuan’s knees even further apart and tapped them to bend in the right direction with his toe.

Heat radiated off of Shen Yuan. He smelled surprisingly fresh despite rotting in the apartment all day. It was intimate smelling the same soap Liu Qingge used on Shen Yuan’s body. His personal scent mixed with it to create something alluring, tantalizing.

“Now lift your arms,” Liu Qingge’s voice was no louder than a whisper. His hands guided Shen Yuan’s triceps upwards. They shuddered with the weight of Cheng Luan.

His fingertips wrapped around Shen Yuan’s. “Hold the hilt like this.” He tightened his grip, hearing Shen Yuan’s breath hitch in his throat.

The hair by Shen Yuan’s ear fluttered with Liu Qingge’s shallow breaths.

Liu Qingge dared to lean closer as he brought Shen Yuan’s arms down in a steered swing. His cheek brushed against the soft and shiny locks and it was as he thought. He’d never dared to get this close to Shen Qingqiu, but now Shen Yuan’s very real body was in his arms.

His eyes shut—

No!I

Liu Qingge flinched away and Cheng Luan clattered to the ground without his help. The tip dug into the rug.

“What’s wrong?” Shen Yuan turned back to look, his neck bright red.

Everything. Everything was wrong. That was disgusting of him. He was disgusting. He stomped to the bedroom and slammed the door.

And away from Shen Yuan’s probing stare, Liu Qingge clutched his throbbing chest in his palm.

Chapter End Notes

fellas is it gay to hold your roommate's sword

Chapter 15: Elixir pt.2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan sighed.

He had been doing an awful lot of sighing lately. Sighing before sitting down, sighing after standing up. Sighing when opening a door, sighing when closing a door.

To be honest, the sighing was starting to grate on Liu Qingge's nerves. What was wrong with the boy? Did he want something? If he wanted something, why didn't he just say it?

But this was a sleep-sigh, and therefore his needs couldn't be communicated.

Liu Qingge stood in the kitchen munching a fruit. He was all ready to go to the gym, but usually liked to say goodbye to Shen Yuan before he left.

He waited an extra minute before Shen Yuan shifted under his blankets and sighed again.

Okay. He grabbed his bag and headed out the door.

Liu Qingge went through his usual routine, stretching and then performing a series of punches and kicks on those bags filled with sand. As usual, people stared and watched, but he focused solely on his opponent. The bag didn't fight back, of course, but the burning pain in Liu Qingge's knuckles was what he was really after.

Because of his idiotic mistake with letting Shen Yuan hold Cheng Luan that left an uncomfortable sensation in between his legs, he'd been wasting time at the gym more frequently. He couldn't bear to look at Shen Yuan's blushing face for any longer than he had to. Thus, the gym was his sanctuary.

Trainers tried to recruit him for more MMA matches, and he would usually accept, but there was something about the pressure of being watched and observed that scared him. If he had more support, then perhaps…

But support from who? He would *never* ask Shen Yuan to do that. And what would Shen Yuan do? The man was too weak to hold a punching bag without flying across the room.

Great. Now he was thinking about Shen Yuan again. Exactly what he *didn't* want to think about while being here.

He returned his focus to the stinging in his knuckles.

Later, he took a wooden practice sword to the bags. He was still pissed they didn't allow him to use Cheng Luan, but these weighted swords were the next best thing. Granted, if he did use Cheng Luan, he would owe the gym a significant amount of money in equipment replacement fees.

It wasn't until sweat was pouring down his spine that Liu Qingge stopped.

Finally, a few hours without thinking of Shen Yuan.

When he was in a mood like this, people knew not to approach him. In the mirror, his eyes burned, and chest heaved. Strands of his ponytail flopped around his face, his braid partially undone.

He looked crazy. He *felt* crazy.

That's what he got for pining over a man like Shen Yuan.

Liu Qingge rinsed off his body in the shower (he still preferred baths, by the way) and packed up his sweaty clothes. They were particularly filthy today after working out and Shen Yuan would need to wash them. He still didn't understand how they got washed in that odd box contraption device thing. It wasn't his problem.

When he returned to the apartment, Shen Yuan was still an unmoving lump on the couch. Usually by now he was at least sitting up.

"Shen Yuan," Liu Qingge dared to poke his clothed shoulder with his finger.

The boy didn't stir.

Dread spiked through Liu Qingge's chest. *Was he dead* ? No, that was absurd. "Shen *Yuan* ."

Thank *god* he shivered and peeled open his eyes. "Huh?" As he lay on his back, his flushed face was revealed.

With those sleepy eyes, parted lips, and pink cheeks, Liu Qingge was going to have a very hard problem on his hands very fast.

"What's wrong?" Shen Yuan's voice was raspy.

Did he stay up late on that godforsaken phone ? "You've been sleeping for a very long time."

Shen Yuan shuddered. "Oh. 'M so cold." Even after those words, he attempted to stand from the couch with his blanket wrapped around his shoulders as if to prove his point.

Liu Qingge watched him stumble to the kitchen and lift the kettle from its base. He filled it with water, but couldn't lift it from the sink. Okay, Liu Qingge knew he was weak, but this was just pathetic. With some effort, Shen Yuan managed to place it back on the base and flip the mysterious water-heating switch.

After that, he rested his forehead against the countertop, heaving deep, uneven breaths.

This wasn't normal. Liu Qingge stood beside Shen Yuan at the counter while the water bubbled. He flicked Shen Yuan's head onto his cheek and pressed the backs of his fingers to his forehead. Boiling hot. "You're sick."

Shen Yuan groaned. “No… This happens all the time,” another shaky exhale, “I swear I’m fine. Some tea and it’ll be okay.”

Liu Qingge caught him just before he collapsed to the floor.

He didn’t have time to overanalyze the very real feeling of Shen Yuan’s body leaning against him. He swept him up into his arms, walking towards the bedroom.

Shen Yuan’s eyes shot open, face becoming even redder. His legs tangled in the blanket as he kicked and squirmed. “Liu Qingge--! Put me down!” He pushed on his chest with trembling hands.

Liu Qingge squeezed him close to his chest. “You will rest.”

That was all it took to get Shen Yuan to stop struggling. “My teaaaa…” he whined. But in the short journey from the kitchen to the bedroom, his forehead rested against Liu Qingge’s collarbones.

Liu Qingge took a deep breath to steady his pounding heart. He let Shen Yuan slip to the mattress, cradling the back of his warm neck. He slipped his glasses from his sloped nose and folded them to place on the bedside table. He looked younger without them.

Now what?

Right, the tea. That would be a good start. Liu Qingge went back to the kitchen and filled Shen Yuan’s cup with the steaming water. To it, he added a bag of lemon tea. With careful steps, he carried it back to the bedroom.

When he returned, Shen Yuan was bundled under the very blankets Liu Qingge had slept with. He shivered even while sweat beaded on his forehead.

He was still at a loss. What had Shen Yuan done for him while he was ill? He used cloths to wipe the sweat away, fed him tea and broth, let him rest.

But it was different than what he’d been taught. His own times being healed and healing others with qi. Maybe… qi would work this time. It was worth a try, right?

Liu Qingge guided Shen Yuan to a sitting position. “I know you’re cold,” he said at Shen Yuan’s protests, “but you’re drenched in sweat.” His jaw clenched when he lifted the hem of Shen Yuan’s shirt up and over his head.

The puny Bai Zhan disciples were more muscular than Shen Yuan, but there was something incredibly endearing about his soft body. His skin was smooth and unmarked, save a few moles peppering his ribs, along with a confusing scar slightly left of the center of his chest. The skin there was raised and bumpy, slightly pink. What was that about?

It was Liu Qingge’s turn to shiver. *Stop lusting after a sick man, you disgusting pervert!* He leaned Shen Yuan forward to rest on his shoulder. Automatically, Shen Yuan’s hands came up to wrap around him. He swallowed tightly and stiffened beneath the touch.

Focus! He chided himself. Liu Qingge stretched and stared at his fingers. Would qi flow through them today? Would this finally be the moment where his powers were restored? He splayed his hand on the center of Shen Yuan's damp back, his middle finger lining up perfectly with his spine. He applied some pressure, squeezing his eyes shut and willing to feel that familiar warmth and buzzing that he was accustomed to.

But nothing came.

It was pointless to try, anyway. That was his last attempt. Laying Shen Yuan back down, he accepted his fate. Even in dire times, the qi wouldn't return. But now wasn't the time to think about it.

Liu Qingge cautiously left Shen Yuan, now mostly asleep, in the bedroom to collect materials he needed to care for him. He filled a pot with rice and water. He'd watched and helped Shen Yuan enough in the kitchen to know how to turn on the burner, so he set it on low and added a few basic spices before gathering some cloths from the bathroom.

He went back to Shen Yuan, sitting on his weirdly-comfortable chair he'd rolled from his desk and pressed the damp cloths against Shen Yuan's chest and forehead.

Even in agony Shen Yuan's pointed face was handsome. His lips parted when he groaned in discomfort, but the sound made Liu Qingge's gut tighten. The damage was done. He couldn't stop continuing to observe the twitches in Shen Yuan's face, the tremoring of his shoulders. Seeing his body weaker and frailer than it already was stirred up conflicting emotions of both desire and pity.

The congee. He should check on the congee.

Liu Qingge went through a rotation of stirring the rice, wiping down Shen Yuan, and sitting him up to drink some tea.

When Shen Yuan woke up after some hours, he stared blankly at the ceiling. "I feel like shit."

Borderline hysteric, Liu Qingge choked back a laugh. "Eat this." He pushed a spoon of congee past Shen Yuan's lips. A little dribbled from the corner of his mouth, but Liu Qingge caught it with his thumb.

Shen Yuan turned his head to the side, embarrassed.

Of course, it was uncomfortable being seen in such a position; Liu Qingge understood that. "Have more." He scooped up another spoonful.

Reluctantly, Shen Yuan accepted it before flopping back down on his side and taking the blankets with him. They came all the way up past his ears like he was making a cave of warmth.

Fine, he'd let him rest. Not long after, Shen Yuan's breathing evened as he slept.

What was the time, anyway? Liu Qingge was exhausted from his brutal session at the gym as well as from watching over Shen Yuan, tending to his every need. He didn't feel comfortable

enough in Shen Yuan's state to get some rest of his own. Anything could happen in the night or the early hours of the morning.

So, Liu Qingge forced himself to clean. He washed the stacks of dishes and set them on the counter to dry. He collected clothing scattered around the apartment and dumped it in the basket he was told to, but didn't dare mess with the rattly beast that cleaned them. Liu Qingge kept the congee in the pot warm and prepared a medicinal drink and balm on another burner. Shen Yuan didn't have all the necessary ingredients, so he made do with what was available.

The sun poked from the city's skyline not long after. It seeped through the sheer curtains and illuminated the living space with a hazy orange glow.

Liu Qingge took a sip of his own cup of tea. Maybe it would reenergize him. He didn't allow himself a long break watching the sun rise.

He went back to the bedroom to monitor Shen Yuan. He was very awake, twitchy and grumpy. "I hate being sick."

Liu Qingge had an idea. "Take off the blanket."

Shen Yuan's face blanched. His arms came up to cover his bare chest. "W-what?" You're going to take advantage of a sick man?"

What ? Liu Qingge flushed in realization. He wasn't going to assault an ill man! "Just take off the blanket and lie on your stomach." His teeth ground together.

With shaky arms, Shen Yuan flipped over. Maybe he was feeling momentarily better, but he was still unwell. If Liu Qingge predicted it right, he would feel recovered for a few hours at most and then crash again.

Liu Qingge moved to the side of the bed with his medicinal balm. Without warning, he dug his thumbs underneath Shen Yuan's shoulder blades.

His patient yelped with a croaky voice. "What was that for?!" He continued to shift uncomfortably while Liu Qingge pressed deeply into his skin.

"These pressure points may help you recover." Liu Qingge applied some salve along Shen Yuan's spine. It felt like he was giving a massage. Every touch, no matter how light or heavy, he gave to Shen Yuan sent goosebumps along his limbs.

Shen Yuan coughed. "It's very…traditional."

That was the *point.*

Not long after giving him some of the medicinal drink that Shen Yuan claimed tasted like 'horse piss', he fell back asleep. Liu Qingge covered him with the blanket and went to grab another mug of tea.

Did Shen Yuan have to do all this when he got sick while living alone? Who cared for him in these moments? He said it happened all the time. It didn't feel right that he had to take care of

himself in such a state. Shen Yuan hardly cared for himself as was.

He drained the mug of tea, washing it and then went back to the bedroom. If everything was okay, Shen Yuan would be fast asleep for a good few hours. The medicinal tea was supposed to help with that.

Liu Qingge stepped past the door. The room smelled stuffy of sick and medicine, but after a few days it would go back to normal. He rung a damp cloth over a bowl of water and dabbed it along Shen Yuan's slender throat. Liu Qingge wanted nothing more than to touch that skin as an act of tenderness with a Shen Yuan who was alert and aware. He wanted to take that Adam's apple—

Shen Yuan tossed and turned. "Liu- *gege* …"

Liu Qingge stumbled backwards. Did he hear him right? This term of endearment coming from Shen Yuan's lips stopped his heart. When the beat returned, it was three times as fast and hard as it normally was.

He paced around the bedroom, head in his hands. From the corner of his eyes, he caught wind of those idiotic trophies sitting on Shen Yuan's shelves. Those smiling, carved faces seemed to be mocking him in his predicament. No, Luo Binghe couldn't see him like this. Liu Qingge turned each figurine around, being extremely careful not to touch them for too long or in certain places in case they somehow summoned the half-demon he detested so much.

Okay, even with their taunting gazes turned away the pounding didn't stop. It travelled up to his ears and tormented him there. Air. He needed air.

He opened the window in Shen Yuan's room before immediately closing it again. The temperature change could hurt him. He closed the bedroom door behind him before rushing to the living room's massive windows. He heaved one open and stuck his head outside to feel the wind pierce his cheeks and cool them.

Liu Qingge couldn't keep this up. It was unbearable. With Luo Binghe in the picture, Liu Qingge never had to worry about acting on his impulses with Shen Qingqiu. But there was no Luo Binghe here. There was only a Shen Yuan with whom he resided with, cooked meals with, ate with, ran errands with. The Shen Yuan who was kind under the guise of selfishness and reluctance.

He flopped to the couch with his head in his hands.

All he could hope for was that Shen Yuan would recover and he wouldn't be subjected to hearing his painful delusions that hurt him more than he would ever know .

Chapter End Notes

liu qingge is giving "you're always on that dang phone" boomer vibes

Chapter 16: Date

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for all the love so far :') I really do love reading everyone's comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As corny as it sounded—and it was *horribly* corny—whenever Shen Yuan got sick, after recovering, he found a new zest for life.

Maybe it had to do with the constant sickness in his childhood plaguing him; the going in and out of hospitals, getting tested by numerous doctors for a variety of diseases. Surgery and recovery for his frail heart, needles poking in and out of his skin.

Shen Yuan shuddered.

He didn't miss those days of weakness. Even now he wasn't super into living a big life, but after these occasional waves of illness that would overtake him he felt encouraged to live and breathe another day.

Or maybe it was just that his ass was flat from lying in bed.

He usually celebrated his recovery with binging a new web novel and writing a long, nasty review to make himself feel better. Sometimes he would hire a cleaner to deep clean his whole apartment while he ate at a mid-priced restaurant with his parent's money. Other times he just continued life as normal; playing computer games and making fun of whatever was on TV.

But now he had Liu Qingge. And this Liu Qingge was currently alternating pacing between the three sectioned areas of the apartment. He would start in the kitchen, circling the island two times before going to the bedroom. He would do fuck-all there for a few minutes before hovering over the couch. He made his rounds a few times before Shen Yuan gave up.

"You're bored."

Liu Qingge grunted. That meant yes. Or no. He wasn't great at deciphering the grunts yet.

"Why don't you go to the gym?"

"I did."

Wow , this man was determined to speak in as few syllables as possible! Shen Yuan tossed his phone onto the couch face down. "We can watch a movie?"

Liu Qingge sniffed and moved to stare out the window. He pressed his palm against the glass, looking down at the streets below.

“Do you want to go out?” As ready to take on the world as Shen Yuan felt, he kind of just wanted to be a lazy ass on his screens for a hot minute before venturing out into the open air.

If Liu Qingge had a tail, he’d be wagging it. Of *course* he wanted to go out. The man couldn’t stand being inside and made sure everyone else knew it.

Fine, Shen Yuan would put on real-person clothes and real-person shoes and go out into the real-person world for the sake of this pathetic puppy Liu Qingge. He groaned to the ceiling and hauled his ass up from the couch cushions. “Let’s go then.”

He didn’t smile, he usually didn’t, but his face brightened, eyes glittering with promise.

Shen Yuan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. This man really was something else. “I’ll change first and then we can go.”

Not long after Shen Yuan threw on some jeans and grabbed a plaid shirt to throw over himself if he needed, they left the apartment in search of entertainment. Shen Yuan racked his brain for things they could do; movie theatres, amusement parks, the beach (which was way too far), another historical monument? None of them seemed right.

He cast a glance at Liu Qingge walking beside him. When he did, Liu Qingge’s ponytail swished as if he had been staring at Shen Yuan before he turned his own head. Now he looked straight ahead of them, jaw tense.

Sometimes he was so transparent.

While they walked, Shen Yuan’s stomach gurgled with hunger. Despite the roaring of traffic, Liu Qingge shot him a look from the corner of his eyes. He must’ve heard it, but wisely decided not to comment. If he did, Shen Yuan would’ve kicked him. Now that he thought about it, kicking him would probably result in breaking his own toe. The man was made from steel, or something.

“Are you hungry?” Shen Yuan kicked a stone that skittered along the pavement.

Liu Qingge nodded.

An idea came to fruition, something they could do that would be an interesting compare and contrast from Liu Qingge’s historical knowledge.

They waited at a crosswalk, a bustling food market just a few meters across the street. Shen Yuan poked his head into the stream of cars, searching for an opening. When he saw one, he stepped forward off the curb.

“Shen Yuan—!”

But a strong arm wrapped around Shen Yuan’s chest from behind, tugging him back to the sidewalk. Just where Shen Yuan was standing, a car blared its horn as it tore through the

intersection. His spine pressed against a solid chest. This close, he could hear the pounding heartbeat underneath.

“Watch where you’re going,” Liu Qingge growled in his ear, the breath hot. He was briefly reminded of their impromptu kendo session in his living room. The hand around him squeezed his shoulder before letting him go.

“T-thanks,” Shen Yuan said, brushing himself off even though he wasn’t dirty. His hands shook. Was that from the near-death experience, or the way Liu Qingge’s husky voice sounded in his ear?

What in the Chinese drama was this?!

They crossed the street safely, but Shen Yuan couldn’t manage to shake off that funky feeling in his gut. The zest for life Shen Yuan started the day with had now dwindled into an enormous appreciation for the comfort of his apartment. He wanted to go home and sleep off the event, but Liu Qingge’s eyebrows had finally smoothed as he took in the sights of the active food market.

Sellers called out their prices and products, some even offering samples in small plastic cups. People held twirly potatoes on sticks and carried bags filled with hot food, steaming with condensation. A few people eyed Liu Qingge up and down; girls giggled into their hands and men did a double take.

Shen Yuan grit his teeth. This was a stupid idea.

He was momentarily comforted by seeing Liu Qingge’s eyes back on him.

“Let’s find something to eat.” Shen Yuan stepped into the throngs of people with Liu Qingge close behind.

They just wandered, at first, Shen Yuan paying close attention to what seemed to interest Liu Qingge the most. His eyes lingered on the icy jugs of bubble tea, squinting at the boba inside.

Shen Yuan swallowed a smile. “Tadpoles in flavoured milk,” he said. “Do you want it?”

Liu Qingge didn’t have time to guard his reaction. He turned to Shen Yuan in horror, mouth agape. He couldn’t even sputter a reply. It was exactly the type of face Shen Yuan wanted to see.

He almost didn’t want to say he was joking but did anyway. “It’s not that,” he wheezed. “It’s like jelly, almost. Do you still want to try?”

Liu Qingge’s head shook rapidly from side to side. He guessed it didn’t matter if they were tadpoles or not, the damage was done. He would never try it.

They continued walking down the alley. After some time, they acquired a handful of street foods, including but not limited to: jianbing, jiaozi, youtiao, and tanghulu.

For every sample and street food they tasted, Liu Qingge sniffed it cautiously and peered inside in case a tadpole squiggled out. He would take the smallest nibble he could with the front of his teeth, chew, and swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing slowly. Shen Yuan's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the movement. He had a *very* attractive throat. …Is what someone would say if they were queer. Shen Yuan was just admiring it, that's all.

But for each food, Liu Qingge's eyes would soften and shine in delight.

Then he would eat the whole thing before Shen Yuan got a chance to try it. Liu Qingge's reactions didn't quite make up for the loss and the emptiness in Shen Yuan's stomach. *Selfish bastard* , he thought, but it wasn't malicious, oddly enough.

Soon he got some food in his belly. He was about to enjoy his second-last bite of jiaozi when he swallowed prematurely. It lodged in his throat, and he hacked into his fist, face flaming.

Liu Qingge was there in an instant. Shen Yuan couldn't even take comfort in the feeling of Liu Qingge's warm palm on his shoulder before he delivered *the hardest* slap to his spine. If he couldn't breathe before, he *definitely* couldn't now as the wind was whacked out of him. He felt as if his fragile vertebrae would crumble if Liu Qingge hit him one more time.

"S-stop, stop!" He choked, finally swallowing it. His esophagus burned. "I'm fine n—now." *God* , he needed something to drink. Shen Yuan went to the nearest stand and grabbed two ice coffees. He handed one to Liu Qingge without ceremony and guzzled his down until it was half-full.

That was *twice* today Shen Yuan had almost died! Was Liu Qingge a bad omen, or did Shen Yuan just have terrible luck?

Upon seeing Shen Yuan drink so eagerly, Liu Qingge must've assumed it was safe, and he took a tiny sip from his straw. This must've been the best thing he tasted so far. His eyes shone even brighter than before with the jianbing. "What is this?" he asked before gulping some more.

"Iced coffee." Shen Yuan croaked. He took another swig to soothe the burn. It was cold and creamy, not bitter at all.

Liu Qingge hummed his appreciation, tongue darting out to catch a drop at the corner of his mouth.

Shen Yuan stared a little too long. The damp collar of his shirt clung to his neck.

Whatever.

The sun was setting now, casting pink rays on the sides of buildings and on Liu Qingge's cheekbones. The shine of his smooth face reminded Shen Yuan of some shit novels he had read once about a character who sparkled in the sunshine.

A group of people pushed past him, sending him careening into Liu Qingge. The man easily wrapped an arm around Shen Yuan's shoulders to steady him. Despite being in the crowds

and the humidity, Liu Qingge still managed to smell fresh and crisp. Shen Yuan resisted the urge to inhale long through his nostrils.

Amidst the activity, Shen Yuan caught fragments of conversation about a festival nearby. “Let’s go!”

Before Liu Qingge could huff some kind of protest about too many people or idiotic festivals or whatever else, Shen Yuan grabbed his fingers and tugged him along in the direction of those he heard it from.

They followed until they reached a large section of grass filled with people. The crowd chattered excitedly, holding paper lanterns and decorating them with their names, drawings, well-wishes.

“Let’s get one!” Shen Yuan cried. When he turned to look at Liu Qingge, the man’s face was tinged pink, like the colour of dusty rose petals. He dropped their hands and wiped his sweaty palm on his pants.

Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan collected a lantern; only one, in case there were more people who wanted to join the festival. They found an empty spot and waited for darkness to fall.

Liu Qingge tipped his head up to the sky.

How did we get to this point ? Shen Yuan wondered. Not too long ago he had a psychotic stranger sleeping in his bed who threatened him at sword point. Now he had someone to shop for groceries with, to watch movies with, to hover over his shoulder while he played games. A friend? That didn’t feel quite right. A companion? No, Liu Qingge wasn’t a pet even when he acted like a growly dog sometimes. Shen Yuan didn’t know what this weird dynamic was.

All he knew was that… he didn’t hate it.

The sky darkened even further. A festival employee came around to light their lantern, and they waited for the countdown.

“Are you excited?” Shen Yuan broke the silence between them. *He* was excited. He’d never attended a lantern festival in real life because a) he was chronically online, and b) when he was younger he could only settle watching paper lanterns float to the sky from the window of his hospital bedroom. He would press a palm against the glass and will himself not to cry.

Liu Qingge grunted. He held onto the lantern between them as little as possible, with only the pads of his pointer finger and thumb.

Fine then. Shen Yuan would be excited enough for the two of them combined.

An employee counted down into a microphone that echoed off the walls of the skyscrapers surrounding them.

“5!”

“4!” Shen Yuan joined in, his smile nearly splitting his face in two.

“3!”

“2!” Liu Qingge reluctantly joined in. He muttered the words without much enthusiasm, but didn’t take his eyes off of Shen Yuan.

“1!”

They sent the lantern to the heavens.

It was magical. *This* was the life he wanted to live. He enjoyed the view before gauging Liu Qingge’s reaction.

Shen Yuan’s heart stopped beating; he was sure of it. Liu Qingge’s smile was *dazzling* like this; boyish and charming, showing a straight set of teeth with sharp canines. The ponytail and thick strand of hair that escaped it only added to the picture of beauty. He spun slowly on the spot to watch the lanterns travel like a reverse shooting star.

Never in his life had Shen Yuan seen someone so magnificent.

Liu Qingge saw him and the wondrous face dropped like a lead balloon. Crimson sat on his cheekbones and the tips of his ears. Shen Yuan wasn’t sure why the man was so determined to hide his emotions from him. What would he do, make fun of him for being happy?

But Liu Qingge didn’t smile again, no matter how pretty the lights were.

They stayed until every lantern was gone from the sky.

Now what ? The day had been more satisfactory than Shen Yuan had expected. After almost getting hit by a car and choking to death he still managed to have a wonderful time. And with Liu Qingge, no less. If Liu Qingge were a girl, Shen Yuan would pride himself on a successful date.

Shen Yuan was smug the whole way back. There. How could Liu Qingge miss his whack-ass historical homeland now?

He swung open the door to his apartment and laughed at Liu Qingge’s face. So stoic! Even now! “Did you have that terrible of a time?”

Liu Qingge said nothing, only clenched his fists and glared at him.

Shivers ran down his spine. Was he going to deck him? Whip out Cheng Luan because of a little teasing? “Um, okay, let me grab my pajamas and then I’ll get out of your hair.” Cold sweat beaded on the back of Shen Yuan’s neck as he stepped into the bedroom. Liu Qingge followed close behind. Why was Liu Qingge acting so weird? He was a first-grader’s book earlier on in the day. Easy to read, incredibly transparent, no hidden meanings, messages, or themes. Now? A complete mystery.

“You’re insufferable,” Liu Qingge growled, launching the bedroom door shut. Why the bedroom door needed to be shut, Shen Yuan didn’t know. He approached him with purposeful strides until Shen Yuan’s spine rattled the bookcase.

From teasing? What was Shen Yuan missing?

“I detest these trophies.” To prove his point, Liu Qingge slammed his hand beside Shen Yuan’s head, fingers curling around the edge of the shelf.

K-kabedon. Shen Yuan swallowed. His cheeks heated with the intensity of Liu Qingge’s glare and the nearness of his porcelain face. If he were a girl, that would explain his shaky knees. Anyone would become weak if such a handsome man were kabedonning them in a bedroom. In his peripherals, Shen Yuan saw the flex of Liu Qingge’s biceps where his short-sleeved t-shirt ended. From an outside perspective, the kabedonning was a little juvenile.

“Your face…”

Was it that bad? The glasses, perhaps?

Liu Qingge broke the eye contact, glaring at the floor. “…I can’t stand the sight of it.”

Okay? That was *so* uncalled for. “Then don’t look—”

His warm fingers pressed against Shen Yuan’s lips. “Silence.” Liu Qingge inhaled a shaky breath. “Your face reminds me of someone I once knew.”

Who does Liu Qingge possibly know? The man never talks to anyone.

Liu Qingge’s initial anger seemed to dissipate, but his eyebrows were still drawn low over his eyes. The tops of his defined cheekbones were stained pink.

But what did this mean, now? Alright, he could leave at any time, he wasn’t a captive in Shen Yuan’s apartment. In fact, life would be *easier* without Liu Qingge here. It was a rash thought, and he almost regretted thinking it.

Time seemed to stop. Liu Qingge used the same shampoo and body wash as Shen Yuan, but it smelled different on him, somehow. The Peak Lord must’ve been battling with himself internally because he dropped his head.

“Well…” Shen Yuan chuckled nervously. “If that’s all—” He turned to go.

Liu Qingge’s hand pressed flat against his chest, keeping him pinned to the bookshelves. “Wait,” he hissed.

His fingertips were strong and warm even through the fabric of Shen Yuan’s shirt. He waited.

Liu Qingge returned his gaze again, this time, eyes flaming with determination. If Shen Yuan could’ve startled backwards, he would have. “I need,” the Peak Lord’s hand left his chest to grip Shen Yuan’s jaw, “to see something.” His cheekbones burned an even brighter shade of red.

What did he need to—!

Something warm and soft pressed against Shen Yuan's mouth, catching him by surprise. His eyes shot open. Shen Yuan registered staring into the glittering eyes of Liu Qingge, but only two seconds later did he shove him back.

"Wait—" He stuttered. Liu Qingge's chest felt rock solid and blazing hot.

But Liu Qingge didn't let him speak. His fingers dug into the back of Shen Yuan's neck and pulled him back to his mouth.

The fuck!? Liu Qingge's other hand left the shelves to wrap around Shen Yuan's waist and tug him flush against his muscular body. His lips parted under Liu Qingge's attack. The Peak Lord took the opportunity to shove his tongue past his mouth and continue sucking and nipping at his lips.

But I'm not gay, Shen Yuan scraped together his hazy thoughts. *I don't even like this guy* . But his own tongue danced around Liu Qingge's. His eyelids fluttered shut subconsciously, and the frames of his glasses dug into his eyebrows.

It was too much. The push and pull of Liu Qingge's aggressive kisses, his burning hands manipulating Shen Yuan's body. *Fuck, fuck, fuck—!*

He summoned the power to push Liu Qingge stumbling backwards, until his hips bumped against Shen Yuan's computer desk. With Liu Qingge's mouth no longer on his own, Shen Yuan gasped for air, head spinning.

Liu Qingge looked disheveled, for once. His chest also rose and fell with effort. His gaze penetrated into Shen Yuan's soul with his expanded black pupils.

"Get—" Shen Yuan panted, the raspiness of his own voice surprising him, "—away from me."

Liu Qingge's expression was hard to read while Shen Yuan left him in the bedroom. He didn't *want* to think about it right now. He clutched his tight chest and wheezed for oxygen.

Oh.

My.

God.

Chapter End Notes

AND AT LAST I SEEEEEE THE LIIIIIIIGHT AND IT'S LIKE THE FOGGGGG HAS LIFTEDDDDD~

Chapter 17: Con pt.1

Chapter Notes

This was J's idea, everyone say thanks to J

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan woke up.

Assault! Assault! Assault! Was the first thing on his mind. Was what Liu Qingge did not assault?

Shen Yuan had a fitful night because of it. Even after waking, his lips tingled with the feeling of Liu Qingge's mouth.

What was he trying to determine by doing that? By forcing himself on Shen Yuan? By holding his body under his warm palms and kissing him so passionately like his life depended on it? By making Shen Yuan's head spin from the way his body pressed against him?

Fuck! What did he do now? He had these plans for him and Liu Qingge to spend the day at a comic convention, perusing the stalls and spending more money than necessary. He had nearly forgotten about it, with all the events from his sickness and yesterday's outing.

And now he had two tickets to Comic Con and who else was he supposed to go with!? It was going to be a nice treat for Liu Qingge and a chance to observe his reactions to more merchandise of Luo Binge and Shen Qingqiu. He set his alarm early (8 am) and everything.

He also only recently discovered all of his figurines had a scenic view of the back of the bookshelf. Someone had turned them around and it definitely wasn't Shen Yuan. He found it more funny than annoying, opting to leave it.

Liu Qingge always got twitchy when Shen Yuan brought up Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe, but he didn't talk about the characters enough to make detailed notes of it. Maybe they had some beef aside from what went down in Airplane's shit-fuck novel.

Screw it, he would go anyway. If Liu Qingge made a fuss he would allow him to tag along. He tiptoed into the kitchen to grab a slice of toast. For all he knew, Liu Qingge was at the gym already and then he wouldn't have to—

The bedroom door creaked open.

Shit! Abort, abort!

Liu Qingge jolted to a stop in the doorway. His face blanched at the sight of Shen Yuan mid-toast-grabbing.

“How was your sleep?” Liu Qingge’s voice was robotic and stiff.

Shen Yuan didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry. He almost spat out “shit, thanks to you,” but decided against it. Why start the day on a negative note? Besides, mentioning it would only stir up memories of the previous night: the way Liu Qingge’s tongue felt in Shen Yuan’s mouth, how his hips pressed against his own, the solidity of his lithe muscles…

And he wouldn’t want to think about *that* again.

“Fine,” he squeaked. He couldn’t dare to say more. He slapped on a blob of butter and watched it turn into liquid on the hot bread.

Liu Qingge ate an apple. Together, they crunched without speaking. What could they possibly say?

“I’m going to—”

“Today I thought—”

They spoke at the same time. Oh. How awkward. As if the atmosphere couldn’t get more uncomfortable, these two goons had somehow managed.

Liu Qingge cleared his throat and gestured vaguely in Shen Yuan’s direction. He picked out the seeds from his apple core and lined them on the table from biggest to smallest.

It was endearing. He looked like a child, almost; unsure and hesitant, small. In another world, Shen Yuan would pinch his cheeks between his fingers and coo at how cute he looked when he pouted. But this was *this* world and he was straight and would never do such a thing. “I have tickets for…an event today. I thought we could go together.”

God , it sounded like he was asking Liu Qingge on a date!

The Peak Lord didn’t look up from his seeds aligned on the table. “Okay.”

Just like that? His prompt response shocked Shen Yuan. No fight? No scoff? No more questions? Heck, Shen Yuan would take it. The less bickering with Liu Qingge the better. “You can take Cheng Luan along. In fact, I recommend you do.”

His interest was piqued, now. “Are we going to fight something?”

Shen Yuan battled with his emotions, biting his cheek to keep from laughing at the hopeful expression on Liu Qingge’s face. Poor boy.

“Uhh, not quite,” he hedged. “Go put on the clothes you came in; your robes.”

The chair clattered on the floor as Liu Qingge practically *ran* to put on his beloved historical clothing. The man was probably ready to burn his modern-day clothes.

Only moments later, Liu Qingge was completely ready to go. His hair was up in its ponytail, everything was fastened accordingly, including Cheng Luan resting on his hip. Shen Yuan almost forgot what he looked like in this outfit but he was *so* glad he had the reminder. What he wouldn't give right now to watch Liu Qingge undress *just* so he could observe the way he got himself ready.

It was a horny thought, but everyone thought that way, really.

Distantly, Shen Yuan knew in his mind he himself should get ready for the con. He wasn't going to wear a costume, he never cosplayed in his years of attending. He was one of those greasy, pretty-faced nerds who went to buy merchandise and take a selfie with a cardboard cutout standee of their fave.

Shen Yuan hummed. The braid in Liu Qingge's hair didn't look…quite right? He was literally looking at the real deal, but to convince the public, Liu Qingge needed something a bit… more. "Sit down." He wiped his hands on his shorts (he would wash them later, *promise*), and plopped on the couch, scooting his butt to the end of the cushion.

Liu Qingge looked as if he'd rather go back to the street food market from yesterday and eat the tadpoles Shen Yuan convinced him were in bubble tea.

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes. "I'm not gonna eat you."

The man weighed his options. In the end, he did as he was told, crouching quietly as a cat to sit on his knees in front of Shen Yuan. He looked up at him expectantly.

A pool of heat settled in his stomach. Like this, it almost looked as if Liu Qingge were—were — "D-don't look at *me* , idiot!"

Liu Qingge seemed to realize his mistake. His face flamed red and he whipped around to stare straight ahead at the entrance door. His spine rested against the bottom of the couch. If he tensed any further, Shen Yuan feared he would snap into splinters.

"Relax," Shen Yuan reached for the binding cord around the base of Liu Qingge's ponytail. He barely touched the fabric when Liu Qingge's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. He peered over his shoulder, wary. "I'm just going to make your braid a little better, I promise," Shen Yuan comforted.

Liu Qingge lowered his hand, but not without muttering some things about how his braid looked fine already.

"I used to do my sister's hair all the time," he began, unwinding the tie. Slowly, Liu Qingge's hair tumbled down his back like a cascading waterfall. Releasing the ponytail emitted a burst of the scent of Shen Yuan's own shampoo, but on Liu Qingge's hair it smelled completely different, like some kind of aphrodisiac. He carded his fingers through it, finally getting to feel how amazingly soft and silky it was. Without modern-day shampoos and conditioners, how did Liu Qingge possibly get his hair to such a texture?

Starting at the tip, he unwound Liu Qingge's braid until it reached the base. Shen Yuan's fingernails ghosted over Liu Qingge's scalp, and he *swore* he heard the man gasp quietly. He didn't let that deter him, only gathered a larger section of hair to start a new braid.

Shen Yuan did one large braid along the right side of Liu Qingge's head. Once he completed it, he returned to his hairline to start another, smaller one. As gently as he could, he gathered a few thin strands for a new braid.

Liu Qingge groaned. *Groaned* .

Shen Yuan watched goosebumps trail up the sides of his throat.

It was the fastest Shen Yuan braided in his entire life. He wanted to do a third, thinner braid yet, but didn't want to risk whatever the heck was going on with Liu Qingge. He secured it into a ponytail and stood from the couch as fast as humanly possible.

Wordlessly, Liu Qingge got up to scrutinize the braids in the mirror. He hmphed.

And that was as good as it was going to get.

It only took Shen Yuan a few minutes to throw on some different clothes, stylistically ruffle his hair, and clean his glasses. He double checked the tickets were on his phone, and then waited for Liu Qingge to lace up his pointy joker shoes.

They boarded the subway, spotting a few other people in cosplay, obviously heading to the same place. It was a forty-five minute ride, but Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan had nothing to say to each other.

When they arrived at the station, they squeezed off the metro along with the other cosplayers in their varying outfits. People went all out with their outfits. They had elaborate wigs, handmade armour, real chainmail. Weapons forged from foam and cardboard, eyes coloured with different lenses.

Liu Qingge was silent as he observed the crowds. His knuckles were white from clutching the hilt of Cheng Luan, but already people were starting to stare and admire his dedication to the character.

"You're from *Proud Immortal Demon Way* , right?" Someone said. "Can I take a picture with you?"

Liu Qingge's mouth opened as if he were going to say something, but Shen Yuan elbowed him sharply in the ribs. "He is, and he'd love a picture," he said on Liu Qingge's behalf.

The man glared, but there was nothing that could be done. His scowl only added to the reality of his character.

"I'm so sad you didn't get more lines!" They mumbled bashfully before running off to join their group of friends. They oohed and aahed over the photo.

Shen Yuan bit back a snicker. Before Liu Qingge could ask questions, he tugged him inside the convention center. They got their tickets scanned, an employee told them where to enter the costume contest, and they were on their way.

When Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge stepped inside the artist's alley, Shen Yuan took a deep breath. Booths packed every inch of the space. It was already crowded with fans of who-knew-what perusing the stalls and chatting with the artists and designers, both official and unofficial. Stuffed animals sat nicely in rows on shelves, racks stuffed with fandom t-shirts cluttered the walkways. There were already lines of fans waiting to see their favourite voice actors, actors, authors, and artists at the celebrity booths even though no one had appeared yet.

Ah, yes. This is where Shen Yuan felt at home. The air must have been chock full of bacteria and germs that could infect Shen Yuan easily, but this was a nerd's paradise; how could he possibly stay at home?

He clapped his hands together, bubbling with excitement. "Shall we explore the booths?"

Liu Qingge sniffed. "Stay close. It could be dangerous." His eyes scanned the crowd of people that must have appeared very strange to him. Shen Yuan was sure that lurking somewhere in the crowd were people cosplaying as monsters.

He choked on another laugh, then coughed into his fist. "Sure, will do."

Shen Yuan hardly knew where to start! Everything caught his eye. A wad of cash sat heavily in his pocket and he was anxious to ease the burden. Maybe here he could find another Luo Binghe figu—he peered at Liu Qingge from the corner of his eye. This is what he'd usually run to when in a space like this, but now he didn't feel as strongly toward Luo Binghe. Maybe some other merch would catch his eye today.

Liu Qingge followed close behind Shen Yuan as he looked at the booths. There were so many beautiful posters and tasteful figures of his favourite characters.

Watching Liu Qingge's reaction to each item of merchandise Shen Yuan purchased was also fun. His brow furrowed at the posters of scantily clad men and women alike, he curled his lip when Shen Yuan thumbed through binders filled with prints to buy.

They meandered past the booth of an artist he'd seen on an internet forum. Just a quick scan and he found a blown-up picture of a stunning subject. Time for a little tease, hm?

"Look," he snorted to Liu Qingge, pointing to the suggestive artwork, "it's you."

Sure enough, it was Liu Qingge. He was portrayed with his back facing the audience, looking demurely over his shoulder. His long, black hair was swept over his strong shoulder. Liu Qingge's robes slipped down his back, falling dangerously low to see the dimples above his hips. The best part, most hilarious part, most *exciting* part, was that his wrists and ankles were tied with bright red rope.

Liu Qingge surveyed the photo, his mouth dropping lower and lower with each passing second. “This--!” He sputtered. It was the reddest Shen Yuan had ever seen his pointed face! And what a look it was, seeing the War God of Bai Zhan so embarrassed.

The artist sniggered behind her hand at this supposed-cosplayer’s in-character reaction. “This one’s really popular between the BingLiuShen shippers.”

Excitedly, Shen Yuan watched the gears turn in Liu Qingge’s head. “Bing…Liu…Shen…?” It didn’t seem possible, but he grew even more enraged, clenched fists shaking, “Let’s go,” he grumbled, voice dripping with malice. He yanked Shen Yuan away from the booth while he laughed and laughed, gasping for air.

Liu Qingge gripped Shen Yuan by his shoulders, leaning in close. “I would *never* —" he hissed. He opened his mouth to say more but decided against it. It was obvious he didn’t want to remind Shen Yuan of the compromising position he had been portrayed in.

Just then, he must’ve spotted something over Shen Yuan’s shoulder. His fiery eyes widened. “Get back!” He cried. All embarrassment was forgotten when he stood in front of Shen Yuan, protecting him.

Before Shen Yuan could blink, Cheng Luan was drawn with a *shing* . It was pointed directly at a poor, innocent cosplayer in an impressive monster cosplay. They must’ve been on some kind of stilts because they towered over everyone in the center.

That drew a crowd. People animatedly started taking videos and snapping pictures. Perhaps, they must’ve thought, this was some kind of demonstration!

Shen Yuan put his face in his hands. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Reveal yourself, *demon* !” Liu Qingge’s voice was strong and steady. It almost surprised Shen Yuan. He had never heard Liu Qingge speak in such a powerful way. He truly was someone to fear and admire.

With his robes flowing behind him and shoulders tensing in anticipation, Shen Yuan felt himself go weak in the knees. Seeing him fight in his MMA tournaments was one thing, but how did he look when he was in his element, fighting demons back in his homeland?

The monster played along, settling into a fighting stance. Just before Liu Qingge could leap into action, Shen Yuan gripped his muscly shoulder.

“Liu Qingge!”

“Stay back, Shen Yuan. These kinds don’t frighten me.”

How admirable! How hilarious!

“N-no,” he tried not to wheeze, “that’s not a demon. That’s a person in a costume.”

Liu Qingge paled. “What?” He hissed over his shoulder. “But he looks so…life-like.”

Now there were tears in Shen Yuan's eyes. "That's the *point* !"

Reluctantly, after giving the cosplayer a final once-over, Liu Qingge sheathed Cheng Luan.

"So sorry," Shen Yuan bowed a few times, shoving Liu Qingge down a few aisles to get away from the attention. "What were you thinking?" He asked in disbelief once they escaped. "You could've sliced that poor person into slivers if you weren't careful!"

Liu Qingge bit his cheek hard. "It could've hurt you."

Well, now he felt a little silly. He flapped his hand between them. "Oh, none of that. We're perfectly safe here." His chest grew hot in this crowded space. He needed a distraction. "Let's look at some more booths, shall we?"

As they walked, Shen Yuan's heart continued to pound. Liu Qingge really was testing him left and right! He thought this would be a fun outing for them but for what? For the embarrassment of watching Liu Qingge wave Cheng Luan around? Granted, everyone thought he was in character, but as someone who knew the truth, Shen Yuan couldn't help but feel mortified.

Maybe… he should punish Liu Qingge a little bit. What would make him uncomfortable? Being here definitely did, but Shen Yuan had one more thing up his sleeve.

Liu Qingge wouldn't know what hit him.

Chapter End Notes

if anyone has this ahem art of ahem Liu Qingge let me ahem know

Chapter 18: Con pt. 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Come on," Shen Yuan said, tugging Liu Qingge by his sleeve. "We need to find Conference Room C."

Liu Qingge grunted.

A little part of Shen Yuan was upset that he didn't put up a fight or ask why they needed to go there; it would be fun to torment Liu Qingge some more. After *yesterday's incident* that he has very purposefully forgotten and was absolutely *not* dwelling on in any way whatsoever. He shivered subconsciously.

They arrived at the Conference Room; it was already packed with people. There was a smallish stage at the front of the room, and a table of important-looking people sat in front of it. They were judges, Shen Yuan knew, but Liu Qingge didn't.

Shen Yuan led Liu Qingge to the back of a long line of cosplayers. When they secured their spot, even more people lined up behind them.

Being surrounded, Liu Qingge looked over his shoulders, scouting the room. He must've caught sight of a few weapons—fake, of course, but he didn't know that—because his eyes narrowed and he tightened his grip on Cheng Luan's hilt. "I don't like it here," he muttered.

"Too bad." Shen Yuan said. "We're gonna win some money."

Just then, a man, the host of the event walked on stage. "Welcome to the Costume Contest!" He boomed into the microphone.

The crowd cheered and clapped.

Liu Qingge's face blanched. "Costume…?"

The host mentioned something about the last chance to enter. He went over the rules, which didn't really matter, and introduced the judges. Among them were a few famous cosplayers Shen Yuan recognized from reality TV shows. Maybe later he'd have to see if he could get a picture with them.

"Remember," the host continued dramatically. "The winner of this competition will win…" A drumroll from the audience, "…one hundred dollars!"

There was a small pause before people started to clap and Shen Yuan cringed. One hundred dollars? He spent that much on 2 A4-sized prints at the artist's alley just a few minutes ago. That wouldn't get *anyone* far in this economy. What was second prize, a sticker?

The host never said. Maybe they weren't even giving awards for second prize.

Whatever, it didn't cost anything to enter, and it would embarrass that asshole Liu Qingge. Shen Yuan would get revenge for his humiliating stunt in the artist's alley and for the not-entirely-unwelcome assault from the previous night.

"Let's begin!" To thunderous applause, the host welcomed the first cosplayer, someone Shen Yuan didn't know.

The line shuffled forward.

Liu Qingge watched with horror as more cosplayers crossed the stage and they approached closer. "Shen Yuan," he turned to him. "I don't want to do this." His eyes dripped with desperation.

"This is your payback," Shen Yuan grinned, pushing aside that little twinge of guilt that sat in his throat. It felt like a ball of yarn he couldn't swallow.

"Shen Qingqiu from *Proud Immortal Demon Way* !"

Both Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge whipped their heads to look at the stage.

The cosplayer looked good with his long wig and fluttering fan. The robes weren't *nearly* the quality of Liu Qingge's, but that would be hard to get considering the authenticity of Liu Qingge. It was pretty solid.

Liu Qingge snorted. "You'd make a much better Shen Qingqiu."

What ?

He didn't have time to dwell on it because only a few cosplayers remained before it was Liu Qingge's turn. Shen Yuan tugged on the collar of his robes, yanking him down to be at his level. "Let's fix you up here…" he muttered. He arranged Liu Qingge's robes, tightening the belt. Then he fiddled with his soft hair, adjusting the braid between his fingertips and combing through the few knots that worked themselves into the ends of Liu Qingge's ponytail.

"We should've put some makeup on…" Shen Yuan trailed off after he held Liu Qingge's cheeks in his palms and looked into his eyes.

Liu Qingge's gaze was…heady. His eyelids were low and pupils blown so wide they looked completely black. His breath was hot and shallow on Shen Yuan's nose.

He looked at Shen Yuan like he was his next meal.

Was this a hot flash? Could men have hot flashes? He was suddenly drenched in sweat underneath his armpits and on the back of his neck. God, the convention center needed to turn on the air conditioner.

Shen Yuan cleared his throat and took a *wide* step back. "That should be good!" He squeaked, then grew serious. "When you get on stage, do something cool with Cheng Luan. Some swishy sword shit."

Liu Qingge wrinkled his nose at ‘swishy sword shit’. His pointed eyebrow also quirked upwards. He looked haughty and disgusted. Obviously, there was some specific term for whatever demonstration Liu Qingge would whip out. “I’m not—"

“What’s your name, sir?” The host interrupted. They were now at the front of the line.

Shen Yuan didn’t miss the way Liu Qingge gave the host a quick once-over. “Liu Qingge.”

“Awesome, who are you cosplaying?”

“…Liu Qingge.”

“What? Oh. Haha. Okay. Um. What from?”

Shen Yuan could see the gears cranking in his head. “ *Proud Immortal Demon Way* ,” he hissed in his ear.

“ *Pro—* ”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer boomed into the mic, “Liu Qingge from *Proud Immortal Demon Way* !”

Now the conference room felt too *cold* . Shen Yuan shivered and trembled as he watched Liu Qingge take the stage. He knew the man must be furious right now, embarrassed and humiliated, but he appeared as stoic as ever. Shen Yuan’s stomach was in knots at the sight. Would he fumble?

Ugh, he regretted putting him through this. It wasn’t worth it.

But Liu Qingge didn’t disappoint.

Shen Yuan watched his chest rise and fall with a small breath before he unsheathed his weapon.

What he did was…mesmerizing.

Cheng Luan sliced through the air as Liu Qingge twirled the hilt along his hands. His legs bent, shifted, and kicked in fluid motions, almost like a dancer, all while managing the sharp blade expertly.

“He’s beautiful!” A girl squealed to her friend in the seats. Shen Yuan couldn’t help but agree.

Liu Qingge ended in a pose resembling that of Captain America, crouched to the ground with Cheng Luan, instead of a shield, pointing to the sky. In the silence of the conference room, he got to his feet and returned the sword to its holder.

Shen Yuan was the first to clap and cheer. It didn’t take long afterwards for the crowd and judges to join in.

Somewhat awkwardly, Liu Qingge left the stage.

Shen Yuan met him there. “That was *so cool* !” He cried, beaming. He saw Liu Qingge in a whole new light. After the MMA tournament, after his display in Shen Yuan’s living room and the one on stage, this Liu Qingge really knew what he was doing!

The corner of Liu Qingge’s mouth twitched in a smirk. He straightened and puffed out his chest. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted yet again by the final applause of the last cosplayer.

“Now,” the announcer said, sweeping his arm across the crowd in suspense. “Let’s give the judges a few minutes to decide. In the meantime, find your favourite cosplayer and grab a few photos!”

It was as if someone taped a big sign in fat red sharpie over Liu Qingge’s head saying ‘COME TALK TO ME I LOVE BEING TALKED TO’ because more pairs of eyes than Shen Yuan could keep track of locked onto Liu Qingge’s handsome face.

He must’ve sensed it too because he wrapped his fingers tight around Shen Yuan’s wrist and yanked him out into the hall.

“Liu Qingge!” Someone called.

The man walked faster, checking over his shoulder.

Maybe this was a bad idea after all.

Shen Yuan hardly heard Liu Qingge’s “in here,” before he pushed him through an open door. Shen Yuan heard the door click shut before he fully registered where he and Liu Qingge had ended up.

It was dark, for one; Shen Yuan had barely shuffled two paces before he bumped into some shelves mounted to the wall. The sour smell of chemicals assaulted Shen Yuan’s nose. “Is this —?” He started but then Liu Qingge walked backwards and his shoulders pushed Shen Yuan against the shelves.

A closet. A motherfucking closet. For fuck’s sake!! This was something straight out of a corny danmei novel!

Based on the way Liu Qingge’s breath brushed over Shen Yuan’s cheeks, he could tell that Liu Qingge was facing him, spine pressed against the shelves on the opposite wall. If Shen Yuan shifted his toe forward one inch, he’d be poking Liu Qingge’s shoe.

How had they ended up like this in such a short amount of time?

Ah. Right. “I’m sorry.” Shen Yuan choked out. He wasn’t one for apologies. “I shouldn’t have made you enter the contest. I knew you’d be uncomfortable. It’s my fault.” And the worst part was, they wouldn’t even see who won because they were knee to knee in a fucking custodial closet. A hundred extra dollars would be really cool.

Liu Qingge hummed.

O…kay then. Apology accepted? Denied?

“So…a closet, huh?”

In a flash, Liu Qingge was pressed completely against him, warm palm covering his mouth. “Hush,” he breathed.

Distantly, Shen Yuan heard an excited gaggle of girls pass the closet. “Where did he go? I swore he was just here!”

Shen Yuan wasn’t thinking about the girls, though. All he could think about was the scent of Liu Qingge’s swishy hair and the erratic pounding of his heartbeat. The way Liu Qingge’s fingertips gripped tight onto his shoulder and his strong thigh slotted between… between….between Shen Yuan’s legs!

Shen Yuan thrashed in place, but Liu Qingge held him tighter, his thigh pressing firmer against *that* spot at the center of Shen Yuan’s body. The action caused a snake of lightning to course through him. As if the situation wasn’t embarrassing enough, Shen Yuan whimpered.

Liu Qingge flinched, hand dropping to his side at light speed.

Shen Yuan could’ve sung praises to whichever god was watching over him that there was no light in the closet. If Liu Qingge could see the splotchy redness of Shen Yuan’s cheeks that was surely present based on the heat Shen Yuan felt, he would just evaporate into the vents and turn into a nice blob of mold. What a simple life that would be!

But there was a little bit of space in the closet. Why didn’t Liu Qingge step away?

Oh god. Was he going to kiss him again? Their chests brushed together and Shen Yuan could hear his own shaky breath rattling in his ears. While his eyes adjusted to the low light, he found himself staring deep into the sharp gaze of Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge was all rough around every edge, but Shen Yuan knew that mouth was soft and convincing. Those lips could move anyone to their knees.

Shen Yuan wanted it again, deep in his heart. Platonically, of course. In a bro way.

The air was thick. So thick, Shen Yuan worried he was going to start hyperventilating soon if something wasn’t done. His breath came in short gasps.

Just then, the door swung open. Shen Yuan squinted into the light. Liu Qingge was already outside the closet, turned away. He scratched the back of his neck and huffed. “… Anything else you need before we can go back?” His throat sounded tight and scratchy. Was he sick again?

A shiver racked through Shen Yuan’s body. “Um, yeah. I want to check out the authors and celebrity table, yet.”

Now under the fluorescents, Shen Yuan could see the pink on Liu Qingge's ears. "Lead the way."

Shen Yuan did just that.

It didn't feel the same returning to the artist's alley. The con didn't seem as fun anymore. Whatever, Shen Yuan would get this over with and then lock himself in the bathroom back at home to overanalyze everything.

He hadn't even researched the big names that would be attending the con. Maybe there would be someone really cool here.

Shen Yuan scanned the lines. Most of them were pretty long. As for the names, he didn't know many people. Some of them he heard mentioned on some forums where their novels were bashed. But Shen Yuan only really followed the flaming forums anyways.

He was just about to consider leaving when he caught a glimpse of a *very* familiar name. Painfully familiar.

AIRPLANE SHOOTING TOWARDS THE SKY ?!

How…how *dare* that scummy, low-life, fuck-ass, shit-excuse-for-an-author moron show his face here? Oh, *OH* Shen Yuan had words for this bitch! "Come with me." He latched onto Liu Qingge's beefy bicep, dragging him across the floor.

" *You* ," Shen Yuan seethed, practically frothing at the mouth. He pounded his fist on the table in front of this pathetic-looking man. He would be cute and soft if it weren't for that shit-eating grin on his face. " *Explain yourself* ."

Airplane's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Then, the smugness returned. "Oh, *I* know who you are," he laughed. He scribbled his signature on a poster that depicted Luo Binghe wielding Xin Mo, surrounded by flames. It looked a little cool, but Shen Yuan would never dare admit that. "You're my biggest fan, aren't you?"

Shen Yuan could have exploded! "The *audacity* you have! Showing your face here after ignoring me!"

Airplane yawned. "How's that going, by the way? Honestly, it was such a far-fetched tale I considered throwing it in a chapter." His delivery was odd, though. Airplane feigned confidence, his eyes darting rapidly from side to side. His eyelids twitched and sweat beaded on his forehead. "Speaking of, is this the man of the hour?" He finally gestured to Liu Qingge.

Shen Yuan's rage faded enough to see Liu Qingge's crossed arms and reserved expression. "I know you," Liu Qingge said. "Shang Qinghua."

Shang Qinghua ? Where had Shen Yuan heard that name before? Of course! The An Ding Peak Lord!

Liu Qingge grit his teeth. *" Traitor* ."

He must have been referring to the character selling information to the Demon Realm. But why did he call him Shang Qinghua? Did he also come to this world somehow? No, it wasn't possible. Airplane was always here. Shang Qinghua was always there.

Something sat uncomfortably in Shen Yuan's gut. It's like he was on the brink of discovering something but couldn't identify it.

Airplane scoffed. "So, this is your guard dog, Cucumber-bro?"

Liu Qingge hesitated a little too long before answering. His ears burned red. "I'm not a dog."

"No worries," Airplane sighed. "I have some security of my own." He looked over his shoulder and, in an instant, the room seemed to turn ten degrees chillier.

Shen Yuan heard Cheng Luan being removed. A shadow was cast over the poor excuse of an author, but he didn't seem worried, only more confident.

" *Mobei-Jun* ." Liu Qingge was struggling to keep his composure.

Shen Yuan was *also* struggling to keep his composure! Too many things were happening at once! What the fuck!? First Airplane dared to show his face, then Liu Qingge was calling Airplane by the An Ding Peak Lord's name, and *now* Luo Binghe's right-hand man in the Demon Realm was here? How many other *Proud Immortal Demon Way* characters were skulking around the streets of China ? Was there something Shen Yuan had missed in the span of these three minutes? Someone who passed Beijing University's entrance exams couldn't be this stupid, right?!

Mobei-Jun lived up to his name as the King of the Northern Desert. He was massive, for one, big, bulging biceps crossed over his muscular chest. He wore what he probably would have worn in the novel, a fur-lined cape that must have been suffocating in the Beijing heat, and robes that were parted to reveal the almost blue complexion of his skin.

"What does this mean?" Shen Yuan whispered. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Airplane shrugged. "Who knows? I was going to respond to your email, I really was. It just kind of," he looked at Mobei-Jun for a moment, red creeping up his face. "Slipped my mind."

Slipped his mind? SLIPPED HIS MIND ? He could've died if he made the wrong move with Liu Qingge! "Why you—" He lunged forward to pounce on the man, or strangle him, or whatever, but a solid arm wrapped around his waist, holding him back.

"Let's go," Liu Qingge said. It was odd, coming from him. The Liu Qingge he knew would never back down from a fight. "You're going to get pummeled by Mobei-Jun in a second if you get near Shang Qinghua."

There it was. It wasn't that he was all the sudden a peacemaker, but that Shen Yuan stood no chance.

But going sounded like a *great* option. Shen Yuan had a pounding headache from all the events.

Liu Qingge led him to the exit, but Shen Yuan's brain was going a thousand miles a minute. There were so many questions he had: what was Airplane's role? Why was he not perturbed by being called Shang Qinghua? How did Mobei-Jun find him? Why did Mobei-Jun come here? Fuck it, he didn't even know how Liu Qingge had come here.

And then Liu Qingge had said Shen Yuan would make an excellent Shen Qingqiu. Did that… mean anything?

Shen Yuan looked over his shoulder, view of the *PIDW* author long gone. All he could hope was that Airplane would, one day, give him some answers. Until that time arrived, he would be left in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

i actually felt soooo bad making Liu Qingge do the costume contest :(but plot, you know.....

check out art for this chapter (by me) here!

Chapter 19: Basketball

Chapter Notes

!!!!TW!!!!
.
Slight dubcon

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was nothing Shen Yuan loved more than sitting on his ass and doing nothing at home. Unfortunately for his roommate, there was nothing he *hated* more.

After going to the gym *twice* , Liu Qingge still paced around the apartment. He even managed to wash all the dishes and sweep the floors. If Liu Qingge being bored meant Shen Yuan had a free maid, he'd take it.

But watching the man stare out the window and tsk and hover over Shen Yuan's shoulder—the *constant* hovering, god—was more infuriating than any pro to the arrangement. They just went to a comic convention a few days ago! What more could Liu Qingge want?

In these moments of silence where he was trapped in the apartment, it felt disturbingly intimate and domestic. Liu Qingge was still staring at him any chance he got. It bothered Shen Yuan even more than before, especially now that he would always whip his head away like he was never looking in the first place. Painfully obvious, excruciatingly awkward.

Liu Qingge finally resorted to swinging Cheng Luan around the living room.

"Don't you ever get tired of kendo?" Shen Yuan asked, pocketing his phone. He put his chin in his hand to observe Liu Qingge's fluid movements.

"No." A beat. "It's not *kendo* ."

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes. "Sword-swinging, cultivation, whatever. What about MMA? Do you wish you learned more things?"

It was as if Shen Yuan suggested that Liu Qingge gave up self defense altogether with the glare he received. That man was *so* fun to tease! "I know everything I need to know."

"Oh really? Do you even know what baseball is?"

Liu Qingge faltered. "…" He said.

"Football?"

Cheng Luan returned to its sheath.

“Oh my god, you don’t. Basketball?”

Liu Qingge swallowed.

Fuck, was it too late? Shen Yuan quickly checked the time and smiled. *Perfect.* If they hurried, they could run to the sports store not too far from Shen Yuan’s apartment. Even better, there was a basketball court close to that, yet.

It didn’t take much convincing to get Liu Qingge back into his workout clothes again. “Are we going to the gym?” he asked, voice innocent and full of juvenile hope.

Oh, silly boy. “Uh, something like that.” They *were* going to be moving, so that would keep this hyperactive leech happy.

Shen Yuan grabbed his own basketball shorts and pulled them on. His shirt was fine. There were some remnants of chip dust, but that wouldn’t matter too much. It was hardly visible, after all. “Ready?” he asked once their shoes were on.

Liu Qingge nodded once.

And off they went!

Shen Yuan was filled with energy despite rotting all day. This was exciting. He was going to teach Liu Qingge basketball! It had been ages since Shen Yuan played, mostly because it was something he was forced to do in high school, and he didn’t have any in-person friends to play with now.

And if Liu Qingge didn’t know how to play, maybe Shen Yuan had a real chance at scoring some points. In high school he always got bodychecked and flattened into the floor before his fingertips could even tickle the skin of the basketball.

They arrived at the shop ten minutes before closing. Shen Yuan ignored the shop assistant, bolting straight to the back wall which was lined with sports equipment. He grabbed a pre-inflated basketball encased in cardboard packaging and brought it to the front.

“Is that everything?” The clerk scanned the ball and pushed it back across the counter. It was obvious they were less than impressed that Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan had come in so close to their closing time, but it’s not like they were knocking over shelves or anything.

Shen Yuan confirmed and paid an absurdly high amount for just one little basketball.

While they walked to their next destination, Liu Qingge eyed the ball suspiciously. “What do we do with it?” He sniffed.

“Play,” Shen Yuan said, enjoying Liu Qingge’s puzzled expression.

They had arrived.

The outdoor basketball court was blessedly empty. A few dim street lights lit the court, surrounded by chain link fence. The nets on the hoops were still, alone as the city prepared to sleep.

Without thinking, Shen Yuan grabbed Liu Qingge's hand and tugged him inside the court. Liu Qingge's heat shot right through him. Before it could settle somewhere very noticeably, Shen Yuan yanked his hand away to wipe his sweaty palm on his shorts.

"Um, basically," Shen Yuan started, ripping the ball from the cardboard. Liu Qingge watched him struggle to wrestle it out of its packaging. "The main objective is to get the ball through the hoop. Because there's only two of us, we'll only play with one hoop.

"You're trying to make sure the other person doesn't get the ball so they can't try and get it into the hoop. You can try to get in their way or slap the ball away from them so you can get the ball." What else was there? "Oh, you can't walk with the ball. You can walk if you're dribbling it, but if you stop, you can't start walking again."

Liu Qingge listened wordlessly. His arms were crossed tight over his chest.

Did he get it? Only one way to find out. "Uh, okay. Here, try bouncing it a few times."

Liu Qingge took the ball and threw it to the ground. With great basketball-ness, it recoiled and shot upwards into the sky.

They watched it come back down and sporadically bounce across the court.

"Maybe a little gentler."

Liu Qingge agreed.

They practiced dribbling for a little bit, but Liu Qingge had phenomenal hand-eye coordination, so he picked it up quickly. Almost *too* quickly.

Shen Yuan taught shooting next. He demonstrated first, but in all the Shen Yuan luck, it ricocheted off the backboard and back into Liu Qingge's hands.

"Does that mean you won?" Liu Qingge dared to question.

He could kick him in his perfect shins! "No," he grit his teeth. "It's only a point if the ball goes through the net."

"So you didn't get a point then."

No shit, Sherlock ! "That's right," is what he said instead. "You try."

Liu Qingge struggled with how to hold the ball, eventually opting to push it forward with the heel of his hand. It went in. Of *course* it did. He turned expectantly to Shen Yuan.

Maybe this was a bad idea. "Yup, that was a point. Except you held the ball all wrong."

The Peak Lord was silent for a moment. He seemed to be contemplating something. “Can you show me how to hold it?” He tossed Shen Yuan the ball. Something shone in his eyes.

Suspicious, weird, confusing. Shen Yuan was on guard but did as he was told. “You almost want to have one hand under the ball and one hand in front of your face.” His hands curved around the ball as he described.

Liu Qingge moved to stand behind him. Shen Yuan could faintly feel his breath blowing at the hairs on the back of his neck. “Um,” he continued, “when you end up tossing the ball, you kind of want to—”

Liu Qingge’s arms wrapped around Shen Yuan’s, his hands resting overtop his own on the sphere. His chin rested on Shen Yuan’s shoulder.

“—to s-spin the ball when you, when you throw it.” He gulped loudly. Was he still standing? His knees felt weak.

Liu Qingge turned his face, his lips almost skimming Shen Yuan’s burning cheek. “Throw it, Shen Yuan.”

His arms felt like wibbly wobbly Jell-O when he threw the ball towards the hoop. With Liu Qingge’s extra power behind him, it was nothing but net. The adrenaline that coursed through him was most certainly because of that satisfying point, not because of the feeling of Liu Qingge’s gentle smile against his skin or the way his torso pressed fully against his spine.

Shen Yuan almost leaned back into Liu Qingge’s chest and closed his eyes. He *wanted* to do that; there was just something so warm and comforting about his solidity.

We’re outside!! He remembered, and he yanked himself away to collect the basketball.

The night breeze was cool and gentle, but not enough to get rid of the sweat that had gathered at the waistband of his shorts. “Haha… great.” He couldn’t *possibly* look at Liu Qingge now! “Let’s try playing a little bit.” He passed the ball to him. “You start.”

After some direction, Liu Qingge started on the center line. He adopted a perfect basketball stance: knees bent, ready to move whichever direction. He was impossible to read.

In a blink, Liu Qingge tore down the court, dribbling the ball expertly. He blocked Shen Yuan at every given chance, easily evading his swipes and remaining unmoved at his bodychecks.

He leapt upwards and shot the ball into the net. A point.

Shen Yuan wheezed. Just one round and he was already incapacitated! He needed to be this man’s agent and get him on a basketball team. With MMA and basketball big leagues, Liu Qingge could rake in a *lot* of money.

“Your turn.” Shen Yuan fumbled to catch the ball. He threw it right back at Liu Qingge. “No, because you got the point you get to start again.”

Liu Qingge frowned. “Then you’ll never get a chance to play.”

This—! Shen Yuan tongued his cheek. “That’s the way the rules are, Liu Qingge.”

The War God shrugged his shoulders and took his place on the center line.

Oh, Shen Yuan would show him!

After three more exhausting rounds, Shen Yuan had in fact *not* shown him. He lay on his back staring at the starless sky. “ *Fuck* ,” he panted. His fragile little heart couldn’t take this.

Liu Qingge had shed his shirt not too long ago, revealing those sculpted muscles, and Shen Yuan was seriously considering getting rid of his own. He was sweaty from exertion and frustration. What he wouldn’t give to just score one point!

Liu Qingge, that bastard, was smirking at Shen Yuan’s predicament. “Here. Maybe you should have a try.” He tossed the basketball to him. It landed on Shen Yuan’s gut, and he grunted at the impact. Liu Qingge didn’t bother to apologize.

Now, now I can beat him ! Shen Yuan was filled with new energy as he took the center line. He gave a few test dribbles and surveyed Liu Qingge’s stance. He was shifting on the balls of his feet, tracking Shen Yuan’s every move.

Shen Yuan lunged, feigning going to the right before shuffling to the left.

He didn’t even make it past Liu Qingge before the man bodychecked him so hard, he was sent sprawling. At the same time, the ball seemingly evaporated from his fingertips.

His elbow burned with court grit. How did he have such a powerful shove?

“Shen Yuan!” Liu Qingge dashed over; the ball long forgotten. “Are you alright?” The tender hands of the War God of Bai Zhan Peak helped him stand. It was almost concerning how distraught this weapon of destruction was looking for him over for damage.

Shen Yuan groaned at the movement. He was all stiff now. “You’re supposed to shoot the ball after I get thrown to the concrete, idiot.”

“But you’re hurt.”

Since when did this bitch care about Shen Yuan’s wellbeing? He laughed in disbelief. Not too long ago he held a sword to his throat and not too long after *that* he…kissed him. But those weren’t synonymous. “Fine then, we’ll just throw the ball around instead of playing the game.” He shook off Liu Qingge’s hands.

Shen Yuan aimed a shot at the hoop and missed again. Liu Qingge watched as he tried a few layups and failed miserably.

“Can I help you?” Liu Qingge asked.

Help? How would Liu Qingge help him—!

The man crouched to swoop Shen Yuan onto his shoulders. His hands gripped onto Shen Yuan's shins to hold him steady.

Liu Qingge easily adjusted to Shen Yuan's unbalanced state as he flailed. "Liu Qingge! Put me down!"

He chuckled. *Chuckled* . "Not until you score your point."

Shen Yuan couldn't bite back his laughter as Liu Qingge ran to approach the net. He was extraordinarily fast and strong, carrying a full-grown adult man on his shoulders at such a speed. When he got close, Shen Yuan dunked the basketball with as much force as he could muster, watching it sail through the net and bounce off the ground.

Finally!

Liu Qingge set Shen Yuan onto the ground with great care. His hands lingered on Shen Yuan's waist for a brief moment even after he had found his footing.

"Now it's your turn," Shen Yuan panted, exhilarated.

Challenge flashed in Liu Qingge's eyes. "You'll have to catch me, first." And he took off in a mad dash.

The basketball was long abandoned as Shen Yuan chased this Peak Lord who was acting like an adult child. Regardless, the chase had him giggling madly. They scampered across the whole court, and Shen Yuan got close a few times, managing to corner Liu Qingge before he evaded him like a slippery eel.

Until Liu Qingge changed course and barreled directly towards Shen Yuan!

Shen Yuan decided to face him head on, grappling for power once Liu Qingge's hands gripped his biceps. They played like boys, laughing with abandon and shoving each other around to gain control.

When was the last time he had so much fun like this? When was the last time he had a friend to shoot hoops with? To playfight with? He was always closely monitored as a sickly child; playfighting and basketball were discouraged. So doing this now unleashed his inner adolescent.

Being shoved backwards, Liu Qingge staggered for a moment, heel catching on the grit of the court.

Caught off guard, Shen Yuan pushed the stumbling Liu Qingge into the chain link fence. "Got you!" He laughed, hands splayed against Liu Qingge's bare chest.

Shen Yuan's smile faded as he observed the confusing look on Liu Qingge's face.

He wasn't mad, but he didn't look happy. But the way he stared so intently at Shen Yuan made him nervous. No, not nervous, downright terrified.

And not terrified of the man himself, but Shen Yuan was terrified of the way he felt when he looked at Liu Qingge's face. The way his heart stuttered and couldn't find a consistent rhythm, the way Liu Qingge's eyes seemed to burn into him and make heat pulse throughout his body.

He broke eye contact, scared of what would happen if he continued to look at Liu Qingge. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to control himself.

"Look at me," Liu Qingge whispered.

Shen Yuan couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. All he could do was shift backwards ever so slightly. He had to get out of here. Shen Yuan brought his hands back to himself.

Before he could make it far, Liu Qingge gripped one of his wrists, keeping his palm to his firm chest.

Don't look don't look don't look don't— If he looked, it'd be over. There'd be no saving him.

Liu Qingge's fingers came up to hold Shen Yuan's chin. "Shen Yuan," he said, voice stronger. "Look at me."

Shen Yuan looked.

He wished he hadn't.

Because the moment he saw those black glittering eyes, Shen Yuan surged forward as if tugged by an invisible string. Shen Yuan was trapped in Liu Qingge's gravitational pull. If Liu Qingge was the black hole, Shen Yuan was the unsuspecting star being absorbed by it.

Shen Yuan kissed him.

He wasn't sure whose breath hitched first. Liu Qingge froze. The heartbeat underneath Shen Yuan's palm was erratic.

It felt right, in the moment. If given more time, Shen Yuan would be panicking right now. Now that he *thought* about panicking, he felt the familiar creeping of anxiety in his chest. He forced himself to pull away.

Oh fuck. He just kissed Liu Qingge. On *purpose* . "I'm sorry—" he sputtered.

Liu Qingge didn't let him say more. He cupped Shen Yuan's cheeks in his hands and brought him back to his lips.

His mouth, *god* , his mouth. The softness of those lips kissing Shen Yuan so intimately had him trembling. Liu Qingge's hands meandered all over, exploring Shen Yuan's body and holding him tight, like if he let go Shen Yuan would fade into dust.

His head was filled with cotton candy. All Shen Yuan knew were the slow, deep kisses Liu Qingge gave him. Every delicate touch left him overly sensitive. It was completely different

from their kiss in Shen Yuan's bedroom. Where that kiss was hurried, this was languid. Where that kiss caught Shen Yuan completely off guard, this one was just what he needed.

Except also not enough. He needed more. He needed to feel more of Liu Qingge's body against him as his lips parted for Liu Qingge's tongue.

Just as he predicted, Shen Yuan couldn't stop himself. His hands skirted over Liu Qingge's abdomen, feeling it tense underneath him.

Liu Qingge retaliated, holding Shen Yuan even closer, which he didn't believe was possible, by sliding his palms up the back of his shirt. His touch was electrifying.

They made out like lovesick teenagers against that chain link fence under an orange, moth-infested street light.

Liu Qingge pulled back first, regrettably. He didn't say anything for a while, just stared at Shen Yuan before running his thumb over Shen Yuan's sensitive lips. "Shen Yuan," he breathed. "Grab the basketball. Let's go home."

'Let's go home' could mean anything. With the way Liu Qingge was looking at Shen Yuan with his blown out pupils, he sure hoped it meant more making out away from the eyes of the city. But he was also *very* aroused right now. That was irrational, horny brain Shen Yuan. Rational, smart Shen Yuan knew he was *not* gay and this was likely just because he hadn't felt the loving touch of another person since, well, ever.

Shen Yuan couldn't even think on the walk back. Liu Qingge unfortunately put his shirt back on and didn't look at him again. From the corners of his eyes, Shen Yuan could see the tensing of Liu Qingge's jaw and the clenching and unclenching of his fists.

Was he mad? Was he going to punch him? Was he just waiting until they were in private so he could slaughter him with Cheng Luan and scatter the pieces of his corpse across China?

Liu Qingge did none of those things.

The second the apartment door slammed shut, Liu Qingge swept Shen Yuan back into his arms. He wasn't much of a talker. He was a doer. An action-man, if you will. So he took action, connecting their mouths again.

In an instant, Shen Yuan returned the kiss. Liu Qingge skillfully softened, yet hurried it, parting his mouth and leaning into Shen Yuan. His strong fingers tightened around his waist, while his other hand tangled in his hair.

Shen Yuan wanted this, but even he wasn't prepared for the pressure of Liu Qingge's lips and the silkiness of his tongue. Shen Yuan gasped for air.

They stumbled over to the couch until Shen Yuan pushed Liu Qingge onto the cushions. Their lips broke only for a moment before Liu Qingge sat up to meet Shen Yuan's mouth with urgency, and Shen Yuan met him halfway before settling on top of him on the couch.

Liu Qingge's body was astounding; from the extra kendo practice and the abundance of vegetables he forced into their diets, it was like lying on top of a slab of rock. Besides the hardness of Liu Qingge's abdomen, his arms were warm and welcoming, tangling in Shen Yuan's hair.

Fuck , it was so wrong, but it was so good.

While Shen Yuan settled, he brought his knee to prop himself on the couch, only to brush against something astonishingly solid. Liu Qingge groaned, barely perceptible, but Shen Yuan jerked backwards to encounter a delicious sight.

Liu Qingge beneath him, chest heaving, cheeks flushed the most furious shade of red. His eyebrows were drawn low over his dark eyes. He appeared almost… angry.

With the talent and power of a master swordsman, Liu Qingge swapped their positions, hand splayed against Shen Yuan's chest to press him against the cushions. He pressed his own knee against Shen Yuan's center in retaliation.

It was like a bolt of lightning straight to his stomach. Shen Yuan's spine arched while his hips rocked against Liu Qingge's thigh of its own volition. The feeling was addicting.

After watching Shen Yuan embarrass himself, Liu Qingge took the frames from Shen Yuan's face; the gentle movement a stark contrast from their passionate kisses. The action was intimate, intentional, considerate. And it just made Shen Yuan ten times harder.

Liu Qingge was an excellent multitasker. He kissed Shen Yuan until he was a pile of wobbly goo, his hand managing to snake up Shen Yuan's t-shirt to push it up and cup his chest. His palm seared against Shen Yuan's nipples, sensitive from the kissing and touching.

Shen Yuan whined and squirmed into Liu Qingge's mouth, gripping helplessly at his strong biceps.

Then Liu Qingge's hand drifted downward, but the variety of sensations Shen Yuan was feeling with Liu Qingge's mouth, hand, and thigh had him hardly noticing.

Until Liu Qingge firmly grabbed *that* .

"Mmp—no—!" Shen Yuan flailed in shock. That was a *private* place! As a pathetic virgin, only he had touched that before! He wrenched his head away from the assault of Liu Qingge's lips, attempting to push and kick him away.

In a swift movement, Liu Qingge locked both of Shen Yuan's wrists in a singular hand, pinning them to the cushions.

Before Shen Yuan could protest once more, Liu Qingge kissed him again, nibbling on his bottom lip as if it were a punishment. He continued grinding the heel of his hand against Shen Yuan's clothed cock. He could do nothing but helplessly buck into his hand to chase the sensation.

Fuck , this felt *way* different than masturbating on his own! The heat of another person pressing against him and touching him made Shen Yuan's body weak and pliant. No matter what he wanted to do, he couldn't bring himself to scrape together the energy to object if it meant acting against this addicting build up.

He was getting close; it had been ages since he last pleasured himself.

Spots danced behind Shen Yuan's closed lids. His mouth fell open, wantonly accepting the probing of Liu Qingge's tongue, scarcely registering the saliva dribbling down the corners of his mouth. Liu Qingge groaned, grinding his own hips into Shen Yuan's.

Shen Yuan's thighs tightened and trembled at record pace.

The sensation was otherworldly. Shen Yuan's eyes rolled back; his head spun. He couldn't even dream of stopping the string of incomprehensible words and moans that tumbled from his lips. If he had a recording of himself, he would've looked positively lewd.

He came in his pants like a fucking high schooler.

Shen Yuan felt the blood rush back to his fingertips once his wrists were released and Liu Qingge began peppering nipping kisses along his damp chest. After coming down from his high, each press of Liu Qingge's lips made Shen Yuan writhe with oversensitivity.

With expert skill, his hands worked the shorts down Shen Yuan's hips. Before Shen Yuan could even comprehend it, Liu Qingge was freeing Shen Yuan's twitching cock from his underwear. Belatedly, Shen Yuan realized Liu Qingge was stroking life back into it with the searing hot palm of his hand.

"I-I can't—" He squirmed. "Not again!" His thighs trembled but he wasn't strong enough to push Liu Qingge away. In all fairness, he didn't really *want* to push Liu Qingge away.

Without ceasing, Liu Qingge gripped Shen Yuan's chin to meet his eyes. They were incredibly dark and burning with a scary amount of desire. His lips, red from the kissing, were parted and looked so soft. He *knew* they were soft. Shen Yuan wanted them back on his body. Anywhere was fine. "You will." Liu Qingge demanded.

Shudders racked through his body. He was *so* turned on. Fuck his sensitive dick, if Liu Qingge wanted another one, Shen Yuan would give him another one.

Liu Qingge whipped out his own cock, the one Shen Yuan had only seen an outline of, and it was…more than impressive. He hoped Liu Qingge wasn't going to try and stick that in him!

Oh, wait. What *was* Liu Qingge going to do? Shen Yuan was a virgin! He was about to ask until Liu Qingge kissed him again.

Any thoughts Shen Yuan once had dissipated. When Liu Qingge's tongue pushed into his mouth, Shen Yuan could only sigh and lean back against the cushions. If he was going to die from being impaled, let him be distracted by Liu Qingge's kisses, at least.

As much as he braced himself, no breach ever arrived. Instead, he felt something fiery hot, hotter than Liu Qingge's hand, slide against his cock.

Liu Qingge groaned, pulling back. Shen Yuan felt more than saw Liu Qingge's hips roll and that delicious slide of friction returned. It was so filthy, so gay. Shen Yuan would never *dare* to consume porn like this but living it made him regret not having studied.

Wave after wave of build up washed over him. He was *so* close. Watching Liu Qingge's focused face didn't help. His eyebrows were knotted together, sweat beading on his forehead. One of his hands latched on Shen Yuan's hip while the other wrapped around both their lengths.

He pushed forward, slowly.

Shen Yuan was gonna pass out. Oh god, he was gonna pass out. "Liu- *gege* —" The words weren't his own. They couldn't have been. But they were out in the open now for everyone to hear.

Liu Qingge growled. He practically tore off his shirt and Shen Yuan could see those beautiful muscles he so often kept hidden. His abdomen tensed with each thrust. Shen Yuan could only scramble for purchase as he felt his second orgasm incoming. Was calling him *gege* a good thing?

He opened his mouth to warn Liu Qingge, but no words came out. How could they? Blood rushed in his ears so swiftly he couldn't even register the slick sounds of their cocks sliding together, assisted with Shen Yuan's previous climax and Liu Qingge's precum.

"Shen…" Liu Qingge groaned, his voice throaty and deep.

His hand twisted deliciously against them. *Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god—*

Liu Qingge tipped his head to the sky, hips stuttering. He gasped, his seed spurting onto his hand and Shen Yuan's exposed stomach.

"Shen Qingqiu—"

A switch was flicked.

Any pleasure Shen Yuan was about to feel evaporated. His dick softened and melted like a roasted marshmallow. Like someone popped his balloon with the tip of Cheng Luan. Like— he could think of a thousand similes.

He couldn't even feel bad about his ruined orgasm; he was still trying to process. Liu Qingge collapsed onto Shen Yuan's chest, huffing into his ear. Oddly affectionate, he laid a chaste kiss against Shen Yuan's jaw before pulling up his shorts and locking himself in the bathroom.

Shen Yuan lay flat on his back in a pile of sweat and cum.

Shen Qingqiu !?

Chapter End Notes

AITA for moaning my previous crush's name during sex with another man

Chapter 20: Guilt

Chapter Notes

CW: alcohol (?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liu Qingge couldn't sleep.

He royally fucked up.

Even after having arguably the best release of his life, he couldn't manage to shut his eyelids for more than a nanosecond. What he *wanted* to see behind closed eyes was vastly different than what his brain forced him to envision. He wanted to lock in the memories of those desperate faces Shen Yuan made when he pulled away from their kisses, the tears clinging to his dark eyelashes as Liu Qingge rolled his hips, the way his body writhed under his touch, how erect he got for him. And those were just the *sights* . The sounds were another fond memory on their own…

But these weren't the things he saw in the dark. All he could see was that confused and damaged look on Shen Yuan's face when Liu Qingge came out of the bathroom. He didn't understand it at first. Maybe it was unsatisfactory? That could hardly be the case. Maybe he was embarrassed? A possibility. But when he closed the bedroom door for the night, it hit him like a blast of qi straight to the chest.

Shen Qingqiu.

That's what he had said.

His heart plummeted to the Demon Realm, and then some.

Liu Qingge racked his brain for answers. Why did he say Shen Qingqiu's name? It wasn't even who he was thinking of while his hips stuttered against Shen Yuan's cock. Shen Qingqiu wasn't the one underneath his wandering hands.

More than once in his lifetime, Liu Qingge had envisioned Shen Qingqiu being beneath him, face painted with lust. It was when he would look Liu Qingge in the eyes that would send him over the edge. Liu Qingge would tip his chin back and groan as he spilled into his palm.

And afterwards he would be humiliated. Touching himself so shamelessly to the picture of Shen Qingqiu. He would take out his rage in the forest, punching the bark with his knuckles and then slicing them into smithereens with Cheng Luan. Once he finally exhausted himself, he would collapse on his bed and settle into dreamless sleep.

But this wasn't an act performed alone. Shen Yuan was here.

As he observed Shen Yuan's reactions and tasted his skin, Liu Qingge only thought of him. Never once while chasing his pleasure did he expect to see the green robes of Shen Qingqiu splayed out on the couch cushions. All he saw was Shen Yuan. With each thrust, all he thought was *Shen Yuan*.

It must have been those previous instances coming back to haunt him. If he couldn't have Shen Qingqiu, he would fuck up enough to not get Shen Yuan either.

This was his punishment. This was what Liu Qingge must have deserved for eating that goddamn flower. Some unknown side effect.

He scoffed at the irony, turning to lay on his side. It'd been like this for an undetermined amount of time. Incense wasn't used here, and with the dark curtains blocking the window, Liu Qingge had no way to determine how long he'd been thrashing around in the bed thinking of his failures and embarrassments.

What would he say to Shen Yuan? What could he possibly say? *Sorry*? That didn't seem to cut it. *Sorry I moaned my previous crush's name when I was stroking our dicks*? That was worse.

Maybe the best option would be to not say anything. Maybe Shen Yuan didn't really care.

But his lips tingled with the recollection of Shen Yuan's deep kisses on the basketball court. That couldn't be 'not caring', right?

Liu Qingge's head throbbed. If he kept on thinking about the ways Shen Yuan showed care for him today, something else would be throbbing.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling until the beginnings of dawn began to shine through the gap in the curtains. Try as he might, he couldn't will his brain to stop repeating the awkward events. Years and years of cultivation and the War God of Bai Zhan Peak couldn't stop thinking about a man's dejected face.

Okay. That was enough.

Liu Qingge threw off the blankets and changed into his compression shirt and a pair of shorts. He tied his hair into a ponytail. His hand hovered over the doorknob. Would Shen Yuan be awake if he turned it? Would he expect Liu Qingge to say something?

Fuck all this thinking. Liu Qingge was going to go to the gym and punch out his feelings. If Shen Yuan was awake, good for him. His attempt at dismissal didn't have the desired effect. His heart still managed to beat erratically and his insides twisted like someone was wringing out wet clothes.

As quietly as he could, he turned the knob. The door creaked and he winced, but there was no movement in the living room.

He skulked outside, seeing the gentle rise and fall of Shen Yuan's sleeping body. He was curled up on his side, all small, like a puppy seeking warmth in the rain. Liu Qingge's chest grew tight. Even in Shen Yuan's sleep, his eyebrows were drawn together. Liu Qingge could only hope that his dreams weren't causing him more grief than he already endured.

Cautiously, he raised the fuzzy blanket to cover more of Shen Yuan's exposed shoulders. It must've been cold, lying like this. This one action was a dangerous catalyst. Now Liu Qingge could find too many other things to fuss over. He wanted to brush the floppy hair from Shen Yuan's face. He wanted to clean his glasses that had clattered to the floor. He wanted to carry him to his own bed, somewhere comfier where he could have a few hours of peaceful rest.

But that was too much.

Instead, Liu Qingge curled his hands into fists and steeled himself. Who knew the War God would become so weak and pathetic!

He left the apartment without a second glance.

The punching bags at the gym suffered the most. Liu Qingge's knuckles grew bloody and tender, even after being wrapped in tight bandages. The members at the gym knew to stay away from Liu Qingge. He wasn't chatty even on a good day, and today sweat slid down his temples and throat with each punch. He didn't stop until his shoulders couldn't push his arms forward anymore. Only then did he take a sip of water and wipe the sweat from his brow.

He used almost every machine; every tool available to him. No equipment was spared from Liu Qingge's wrath.

Finally, his chest heaved with exertion as he walked to the locker room and showers. He used an icy cold shower to rinse off the sweat. It cleaned him and gave him a pounding headache, but it still wasn't enough to eradicate the thoughts of Shen Yuan's desperate moans.

Fuck. This is exactly what he wanted to avoid.

Liu Qingge looked down at the unfortunate situation growing between his legs. It was amazing how quickly his body reacted when he replayed those sounds and closed his eyes to reflect on those delightful images of Shen Yuan's parted lips, his body squirming with overstimulation.

He almost surprised himself when his own hand wrapped around his length and pumped slowly.

As he recalled the events his hand picked up the pace, wrist twisting in that way he knew he liked. Fortunately, the rest of the shower stalls were empty, but Liu Qingge didn't dare unclench his teeth in case any sound came out.

His abdomen tensed embarrassingly fast as he remembered the way Shen Yuan's spine arched off the couch cushions while he said Liu Qingge's name. No, not even his name, but that affectionate term *gege* in his breathy voice.

Liu Qingge's seed spilled onto the tile floor unceremoniously.

He watched it swirl down the drain, shame replacing the unsatisfying release. What a pathetic person he was! Seeking pleasure so selfishly after denying Shen Yuan of his and, to make matters worse, crying out someone else's name in the process.

Maybe it would be better to jump from the roof of Shen Yuan's apartment building. In this frail, mortal body hopefully his bones would be nothing more than dust after he hit the ground.

Liu Qingge dragged his feet in the way the Bai Zhan Peak disciples would have when they discovered their Peak Lord was back to beat their asses. He was filled with dread and anxiety.

What would happen when he got back? Would Shen Yuan kick him out? Would it be better for him to just not go back? Sleep on a bench? Travel as far away as possible? Maybe then he could find a similar flower that would take him back to the loveless life he lived at Bai Zhan Peak.

But this wasn't who he was! Liu Qingge was a War God. He could tackle this problem head-on.

He was feeling fine, confident, even, until he stood outside the apartment door. Heaving a sigh, he punched in the lock code.

Liu Qingge had barely stepped inside when he was greeted with the defiant face and tightly crossed arms of Shen Yuan.

"Where were you?" Shen Yuan demanded.

Wasn't it obvious? Liu Qingge *always* went to the gym in the mornings. How was this any different? Before he could answer, Shen Yuan continued.

"I thought you left." His eyes darted to the floor. Quieter: "without saying goodbye."

It wasn't adding up. Liu Qingge often left before Shen Yuan was awake thus, not saying goodbye. What did he want him to do, wake him up? What game was he playing? Liu Qingge didn't think this was the main problem they had to discuss. Why bring this up all the sudden?

Shen Yuan met Liu Qingge's stare again. It was an arrow straight to the heart. In his gaze was resentment and uncertainty. Liu Qingge definitely was not an expert at reading body language or facial expressions, but this was the face of a confused man who needed answers.

Answers Liu Qingge didn't yet know how to explain.

Liu Qingge cleared his throat and patted Shen Yuan's shoulder awkwardly. "Well, I'm here."

He shrugged it off and walked away, leaving Liu Qingge to pick up the pieces.

He joined Shen Yuan in the kitchen, watching him viciously slather butter on some unsuspecting bread. He tossed the knife into the sink with a clatter.

“You’re angry.” Liu Qingge said.

Shen Yuan looked at him again. His expression would be completely blank if it weren’t for his under eye twitching sporadically. “I can’t talk about this while sober. Let’s drink.” He yanked open the cooler door and placed an excessive number of jars and cylinders on the counter. They weren’t in the cooler before. He must’ve grabbed them while Liu Qingge was at the gym. Next, Shen Yuan opened a cabinet and took out two small glasses. “The least you can do,” he said firmly, gaze blazing with fire, “is have a drink with me after you fucked everything up.”

Liu Qingge winced. *Everything* ? He wasn’t sure what to say to Shen Yuan’s cute, angry face. If anything, he just wanted to kiss those pouty lips even more. Maybe he could make it up to Shen Yuan that way. Heat curled in his belly in remembrance of last night. He knew how those lips felt on his. It was addicting.

Drinking wasn’t his favourite hobby. Only after he returned back to Bai Zhan Peak after a long time away did he indulge in alcohol alone in his room. He would have just a little bit to feel that tingly sensation in his fingertips before he would collapse onto his bed, fast asleep. If he went to a fancy restaurant with the other Peak Lords, even then he refused to drink. He would instead have tea or nothing.

The least I can do… He grit his teeth. “Fine. For you, I will.” If this was what it took to make things better then so be it. After that humiliating stunt in the gym showers that morning it really *was* the least he could do.

Shen Yuan flicked the cap off a bottle, sending it skittering down across the island. There was something about the certainty of the action that stirred something in Liu Qingge’s chest. When Shen Yuan stood up to him, all Liu Qingge wanted to do was take his waist in his hands and hold him close.

He resisted. This was a delicate balance he didn’t want to ruin. Even though he didn’t know *how* to apologize to Shen Yuan, he knew he had to before things could go back to the way they were.

Shen Yuan filled that small glass to the brim and handed it to Liu Qingge. After he took it, Shen Yuan poured his own. Before Liu Qingge could bring the glass to his lips, Shen Yuan had already tipped his chin back and guzzled it in one shot. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slammed the glass back on the counter. He chased the shot with his slice of bread, devouring it in three swift bites.

It was…impressive. Liu Qingge followed his lead, throwing his head back to pour the alcohol down his throat. It stung and burned funneling into his stomach and he attempted to bite back a cough with little success.

“Now,” Shen Yuan gathered a few bottles and took their glasses to the smaller table by the couch, “you have some explaining to do.”

Liu Qingge groaned internally. He still hadn't managed how he was going to untangle his jumbled thoughts and form a cohesive sentence that wouldn't cause further harm. "Look, about—"

Shen Yuan held up a hand. "No. Not last night."

What the fuck were they supposed to be talking about, then?

He poured them another two glasses. Liu Qingge bit the inside of his cheek. If he kept this up, he wasn't going to be able to maintain a dialogue with Shen Yuan.

"No," Shen Yuan repeated. "We're going back to the beginning." He enunciated each word. "*How did you end up here*?"

Oh . Liu Qingge didn't want to discuss this. But he owed it to Shen Yuan. He owed him more than he'd have liked to admit. Liu Qingge drained his glass, the alcohol warming his cheeks. "A flower. I ate a flower."

Shen Yuan's eyes narrowed in thought, then widened. The corner of his lips twitched. "A *flower*?"

This was painful. "Yes."

"Wait," Shen Yuan drank again, then hastily refilled the cups. "What was the flower's name?" Laughter danced at the edge of his voice; Liu Qingge could practically *taste* it.

"…"

"Liu Qingge," Shen Yuan's shoulders trembled with restrained mirth, a drastic 180 from his behaviour a few minutes ago.

Losing countless fights to Luo Binghe was humiliating. Saying Shen Qingqiu's name while he dual cultivated with Shen Yuan was humiliating. Masturbating in the gym showers was humiliating. But this? This was a whole new level. He felt like a child getting mocked by the older kids he admired. Finally, he spoke. "…The Thousand-Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire."

It sounded *so* much worse when spoken aloud. This world obviously didn't have flowers of this sort. In a world with spiritual and demonic qi, such plants and blossoms with magical properties were normal.

Shen Yuan's reaction just reinforced Liu Qingge's embarrassment.

He collapsed backwards on the couch, howling with laughter. "Wait, wait, wait," he wheezed, face red. "Say the name again!"

Liu Qingge looked heavenward, hands clenching into fists. "The Thousand—"

"*The Thousand-Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire!* " He doubled over in glee again. "That's *so* bad!"

Liu Qingge let him have his moment before muttering under his breath. “Shen Qingqiu told me it was safe to eat…”

This sobered Shen Yuan. “Shen Qingqiu?” He didn’t even bother to pour the alcohol into his glass, he just put his lips around the mouth of the bottle and took a swig. “He gave you something to eat that didn’t kill you?”

Did he hear him right? “Kill me? Why would Shen Qingqiu want to kill me?” That was just absurd. He was invited to his wedding ceremony with his fucked-up demon disciple, for heaven’s sakes.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Shen Yuan leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his knuckle. “When did this flower thing happen? When in his relationship with you?”

There was a strange choice of words. Liu Qingge felt that he and Shen Qingqiu never had a *relationship*. He hummed. “Shortly after he got married, I suppose?”

Shen Yuan spat out his drink. The spray landed on Liu Qingge’s knee, and he brushed it off, disgusted. “Shen Qingqiu? *Married?* ! To who!?”

Who *didn’t* know of their union? “Luo Binghe.” Liu Qingge shuddered. God, he hated that man.

Shen Yuan was flabbergasted. He sputtered and the bottle of alcohol clattered to the table. “*Luo Binghe*?”

“Yes?”

“Wait—”

How many times now had Liu Qingge been told to wait? This was getting out of hand.

“Did that bastard Shen Qingqiu have all of his limbs?”

Bastard? That was harsh. And again with the weird questions. As far as he knew, Shen Qingqiu was in perfectly healthy condition. “Yes, he has all of his limbs.”

Shen Yuan sat back. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion, maybe even in disbelief. “So that little sneak escaped his fate.”

Liu Qingge felt it wouldn’t be appropriate to defend Shen Qingqiu after his blunder the previous night. As much as he hated hearing the man’s name slandered, he was beginning to feel equally confused. Now it was *his* turn to ask a question. “What fate? Why would he not have all of his limbs?” Was this some kind of prophetic future Shen Yuan knew of? Maybe he could warn Shen Qingqiu in time.

Shen Yuan shook his head before drinking. “Shen Qingqiu is a scumbag! In *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, Luo Binghe carves him into a human stick! Why the *fuck* would Luo Binghe marry his abusive Shizun?”

The words rattled around Liu Qingge's brain. None of this was making any sense. "B-but this," Liu Qingge stammered, unable to envision Shen Qingqiu in such a state, "this is all something you've read, right? When does this happen?" He grabbed an unopened bottle and popped the lid with ease. He took a sip, mind growing a little fuzzy. How strong was this stuff? Shen Yuan seemed to be fine.

Shen Yuan pulled out his phone. The sight of that glowing glass irked Liu Qingge to no end. "At the beginning. Or is it the middle? Thank god that loser Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky finally did something about the son of a bitch."

"But he's…" The alcohol was catching up to him.

"Here." Shen Yuan thrust the phone in Liu Qingge's face.

Sure enough, the paragraphs depicted Shen Qingqiu in a pathetic position with no arms, legs, or tongue. A shiver ran down Liu Qingge's spine. How brutal! Who would deserve a horrible fate like this?

He hardly asked the question to himself before he could think of someone. Yeah, there were times he wanted to do that to Luo Binghe.

"I keep requesting that Shen Qingqiu be castrated, but Airplane killed him off before anything could be done. Coward."

There was that name again. Wasn't that Shang Qinghua that Shen Yuan yelled at when they went to that weird convention?

"The biggest question I have," Shen Yuan pocketed his phone, "is why are you here?"

Back to this… Liu Qingge was ready to smash a bottle over his own head. "I told you. I ate that fucking flower and ended up…here."

Shen Yuan blessedly didn't make fun of the flower again. "What was the flower supposed to do?"

Liu Qingge felt as if he likely knew deep down why it brought him here, but he didn't feel brave enough to confront the truth. "It's supposed to give you what your heart desires most."

"Interesting. According to the content I have, from what *I* know…" Shen Yuan worried his bottom lip between his teeth. He wasn't saying something important.

Anxiety curled in Liu Qingge's stomach. "What?"

"Liu Qingge, you died in the Ling Xi Caves. Shen Qingqiu killed you."

Time stopped. He felt… nothing, at first.

Then cold seeped into every pore on his body. The alcohol in his stomach was too hot all at once and sweat beaded on the back of his neck. His ears rang high and tinny. It must've been during that spell with his qi deviation. He was weak and defenseless then.

No. It wasn't possible. "But," his voice was quiet, almost to the point he himself couldn't hear it, "I'm here. I'm alive."

Shen Yuan matched his tone. "That's what I'm trying to understand."

They sat in silence. What was there to say?

"Shen Qingqiu saved me," he choked out. In his dissociative state he felt as if he were a child.

Shen Yuan battled with this. "Maybe in *your* world."

All this thinking along with the liquor was clouding Liu Qingge's brain. "What do you mean 'my' world?" It's almost like they were on the verge of a breakthrough. Liu Qingge just didn't understand it yet.

Shen Yuan leaned back against the couch cushions, crossing his arms. With his meditative demeanor, he looked even more like Shen Qingqiu than usual. The sight calmed Liu Qingge. At least *he* knew what was happening. "I think—and I could be very, horribly wrong—that there are two timelines. Maybe even more."

Two…timelines…

It didn't make sense. It made the most sense. Fuck it, nothing made sense.

Wait. "Shen Qingqiu," he started, something unfurling in his mind. "He changed." Yes, now he could see the picture clearer.

"What? Howso?"

The words came fast from his mouth. He couldn't speak quick enough to capture the thoughts in his head. "We hated each other all our lives. We never got along. We fought all the time. Shen Qingqiu was a bully to his disciples and to the other Peak Lords. But in the Ling Xi Caves, I thought he *would* kill me." Liu Qingge's heart pounded under his ribs.

Shen Yuan was completely invested, leaning forward again to soak up every word.

"But he was so different. He helped me. He restored my qi and then left me alone. I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now. His temperament…did a complete 180!"

It just reinforced what Liu Qingge already knew about Shen Yuan. Shen Qingqiu's changing personality, his refined, gentle, and generous character aligned with Liu Qingge's experiences with Shen Yuan.

He had only seen it in his countenance at first, those teasing expressions and mannerisms. The way he looked in the clothing that reminded Liu Qingge so much of home.

How could a person be in two places at once? If what Shen Yuan suggested was true, then *more* than two places?

Liu Qingge had no idea what was going on. Was Shen Yuan Shen Qingqiu or not? He wasn't, but was he? If Shen Yuan could wrap his brain around it then good for him. Liu Qingge wasn't a big thinker and as long as Shen Yuan didn't have plans to kill him like this alternate Shen Qingqiu did, then he'd be fine.

“What are you thinking?” Shen Yuan asked softly, laying a hand on his forearm.

I’m thinking…I’m thinking… “I’m thinking I need a drink.” Liu Qingge grumbled. He picked up his bottle and took a few big gulps, willing the liquid not to sting so much.

When he came up for air, the room spun. Maayyybe that was a bit too much. His whole body burned and flushed. To relieve some of the warmth, he hooked his fingers under the hem of his shirt and pulled it up over his head.

Shen Yuan squealed and covered his eyes.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” he mumbled. For good riddance, he tossed the warm shirt at Shen Yuan’s face.

Shen Yuan thrashed around before balling it up and hucking it back at him. “Keep your goddamn shirt away from me.”

Liu Qingge vaguely registered his hands reaching out to cup Shen Yuan’s pink cheeks. “You’re blushing~” His face was so warm and squishy.

Shen Yuan managed to turn even pinker, like a rose. His mouth was almost the same colour. Maybe with a few kisses he could get it to a delectable red. Yes, red would probably look good. He leaned in, wanting to paint his face pretty colours.

But Shen Yuan’s fingers pushed him away. “You still haven’t explained yourself.” Up close, Liu Qingge could see his lips pinching together.

Oh. Right. The dread cut through his hazy mind. Maybe another drink would give him some confidence. Liu Qingge cracked his neck on each side and tipped his head back. The alcohol didn’t burn as much this time.

It must’ve helped because the stakes seemed lower. Distantly, he knew that fucking this up would result in losing Shen Yuan for good, but with the liquor in his system it wasn’t that big of a deal. He would just speak from the heart.

“What I said,” were his words slurring? He thought he was speaking very clearly, but what his brain wanted and what his ears heard weren’t quite the same. “Was…an accident.”

Good start, Liu Qingge!

He stared at the dregs of liquid in the bottom of his bottle. “For the longest time, you were Shen Qingqiu to me. Things about you remind me of him. It feels like…” he met Shen Yuan’s gaze. Or what he *thought* was Shen Yuan’s gaze. “…You’re destined to be the Shen Qingqiu I never had.”

Shen Yuan's nose wrinkled. "I'm not your rebound for your imaginary boyfriend," he spat before taking another shot.

Oh no! Things were going wrong. Liu Qingge drained his glass and continued. "But you're not Shen Qingqiu. Not anymore. When I touched you that night—" Shen Yuan's cheeks burned even brighter. "—it was like nothing I ever could have anticipated. All my fantasies were with Shen Qingqiu. But *you* were the one touching me back. You were the one saying my name, not Shen Qingqiu. That doesn't make what I said okay. I regret it more than you know."

He cracked open another bottle—how many was this?—and let the clear liquor slide into his stomach. Shen Yuan was quiet as he drank.

"I guess I'm just saying…I want you to know that Shen Qingqiu wasn't in my head. It was you. It was you, Shen Yuan."

He squeezed his eyes shut for a second. In that second he saw flashes of their intimacy and sighed. Yeah, as far as he remembered he was completely locked into Shen Yuan. Shen Qingqiu's name from his mouth was a mere blunder.

Shen Yuan still didn't have anything to say.

What else could Liu Qingge do? He tried everything. It was in Shen Yuan's soft, pretty-boy hands now.

Liu Qingge yawned and collapsed on the couch, laying his head in Shen Yuan's lap. His eyelids fluttered shut, the bottle dangling an inch from the floor.

If he were sober, he would've noticed the way Shen Yuan's thighs tensed and then relaxed. He would have registered the soft sigh that escaped Shen Yuan's lips. He would've sensed Shen Yuan's fingertips just millimeters away from his face.

He didn't have to sense it, because his eyes shot open just in time for Shen Yuan to freeze.

Liu Qingge wrapped his fingers around Shen Yuan's wrist, bringing his palm to his cheek. Liu Qingge's body buzzed when he felt that skin caress him. He nuzzled into the touch.

It was impossible to open his eyes. The last thing Liu Qingge acknowledged was the *clink* of his bottle hitting the floor before he drifted into dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

please don't ask me what they're drinking I have no idea except it is NOT bottle after bottle of hard liquor lol

Chapter 21: Side Story 1: Mercy

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place before the events of our main story :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a truth universally acknowledged that Chinese boys with too much time on their hands must be in want of successful authorship online.

And so that is what Airplane did.

He was a creative boy since birth, always coming up with absurd stories in class instead of studying. He would write any chance he could: on restaurant napkins, the backsides of homework, even on his own skin if he had a good enough pen. The ideas never stopped flowing.

First, he posted short stories online to a variety of forums, laughing at the critiques he received. ‘Too outlandish’? What was the point of fiction if not to be outlandish? ‘Too many characters’? Ha! Not Airplane’s fault that his audience couldn’t retain information for more than three characters. The list of complaints went on and on, but they never deterred Airplane from his craft. In fact, they only motivated him to create *more* chaotic stories with even more characters.

And thus, *Proud Immortal Demon Way* was born! The title was shit, of course, but Airplane enjoyed these kinds of titles that told really nothing about the story and were just a bunch of adjectives smashed together.

He started by writing two chapters back-to-back. The ideas he had were good, almost. Maybe even brilliant! If he kept this up, it could be a novel, he was sure of it!

Airplane had never written a novel before, but how hard could it be? He would make it so self-indulgent, so pornographic, so ridiculous that readers from around the world would flock to it!

He could envision it now: *Proud Immortal Demon Way* translated into 20 different languages, released in 20 paperback volumes and counting.

So far, *Proud Immortal Demon Way* , or *PIDW* as the fans called it, had not been taken up by any publishing houses and had not been translated into any additional languages, but one day. One day it would *certainly* happen. Airplane was built for success!

He was also built in the shape of a smooshed couch cushion, but his readers didn’t know that, nor did they need to know that. To them, he was the esteemed author Airplane Shooting

Towards the Sky, a clever little joke he had come up with himself.

The chapters came easily, astonishingly so. As soon as Airplane would finish writing 10,000 words, the next 10,000 came hurtling behind. He could spend hours, close to days, without blinking as his fingers flew furiously across the keyboard.

Only after his back started to throb and throat itched with thirst did he realize he hadn't slept in over 24 hours. *Just a few more words* , he told himself, doing a quick chair stretch before resuming.

And then it was dawn again.

Airplane sighed, drained the last of his energy drink, and, counter-intuitively, crawled into his bed.

When he awoke it was the middle of the night and his stomach growled in hunger. Luckily for him, he knew he had at least *one* plastic container of instant noodles in his cupboard.

Airplane flicked on his kettle before collecting the materials. He didn't need much, just the noodles and some chopsticks to slurp them with. He considered grabbing a fresh energy drink to perk him up a little. Yes, that tasty battery acid would work perfectly with the salty and spicy noodles.

He was situated back by his computer just a few minutes later, energized, ready to type. Even his *dreams* were infested with *PIDW* . While he slept his brain couldn't stop rattling through ideas and plot points, introducing new cannon fodder and sex on legs. He thought of positions his beloved protagonist, Luo Binghe, could rail poor women in and situations he could throw his harem into to provide more opportunities for sex.

Sex was just so fun to write! And his audience loved it. Who wouldn't?

Well, he could think of one person.

His most favourite hater, Peerless Cucumber. Airplane loved that guy! He was so consistent in his posts when he tore apart Airplane's chapters and updates to shreds. He always had so many thoughts and opinions that just fueled Airplane's fire. Whatever Peerless Cucumber suggested, Airplane would refuse to do it just out of spite. Or, in some cases, the exact opposite! Private messages from the guy crowded his inbox. Airplane didn't usually read the thousands of messages and emails he got daily, but quickly using the search function always led him to Peerless Cucumber.

Even now, before he hunkered down to pound out another ten thousand words or so (probably more), he entertained himself with Cucumber's current ramblings.

Cucumber's posts always got tons of responses on the forums. Some people agreed with his ideas, but others were sick and tired of his critiques. Why did he keep reading if he hated it so much?, they asked. It was a fair point, but Cucumber's rage was the ray of sunshine through Airplane's curtains. Cucumber was the marshmallow and chocolate to Airplane's graham cracker.

Hey, that was kind of good, he should write that down.

Speaking of writing, Airplane gulped two mouthfuls of lukewarm noodles along with a swish of energy drink and returned to his document.

Ah, where had he left off?

That's right, our devastatingly handsome protagonist was working with the chilling and equally, if not more handsome ice demon king, Mobei-Jun. It was tense between them; although he was loyal, Mobei-Jun harboured some resentment to the young man who so easily took his throne. The Ice King title stayed, of course, so as not to humiliate him.

The two were planning something truly malicious, yes. Perhaps, another heroine would be thrown into the mix and would have to endure the throes of lustful passion from the two, well-endowed men.

Airplane frantically typed the scene he envisioned, those two glorious pillars thrusting in tandem into this poor maiden.

Shit! Fuck!

In his excitement, Airplane's elbow knocked into his dinner—or would it be a very early breakfast?—and those soupy noodles and sugary drink toppled all over his keyboard. No key was safe!

The Great Author Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky scrambled to save his life's work. He only made it worse, pushing the liquids into the electronics.

Then he smelled something strange. Not the scent of spicy broth and sweet battery acid mixing together, but something was…burning.

There was a blinding flash of blue light, as if lightning struck his computer.

Airplane ignored his likely-sleeping neighbours and let out a less-than-masculine screech of horror. Fuck, his whole apartment was going to burn down! He was going to be remembered not as a famous author but as a pile of ash!

He toppled backwards in his chair, head *thunking* against the wooden floor. Pain radiated in his skull, throbbing behind his eyes. Airplane pushed off the ground with shaky arms. The sizzling of his computer had finally stopped. The light had long since gone, but it still blazed white when he closed his eyelids to blink.

When his eyes adjusted back to the low lighting, there was something there that hadn't been there before. His bedroom, usually devoid hulking masses, now had one towering above him.

Scarily broad shoulders, thick and strong legs in a widened stance, an aura unlike Airplane had ever experienced before… Who was this stranger?!

"H-how did you get in my apartment?" Airplane babbled, scuttling backwards.

The mass said nothing. It hummed— *he* hummed—low and dark.

Shivers shook Airplane's body. This man was huge. He could easily overpower him, do anything his sick mind desired. Airplane, running on an undetermined amount of sleep and packaged food wouldn't be strong enough to protect himself.

Hm. Could be an interesting chapter concept for one of Luo Binghe's harem members.

Not the time, idiot !

The ominous figure crouched down low, and Airplane scrambled backwards until his spine pressed against the wall.

City lights seeped through his curtains, illuminating half of the perpetrators face as he approached until he was directly in front of Airplane. He was met with a shining sliver of a piercing blue eye, sharp, nearly covered by a thick, dark eyebrow drawn low. His skin was astonishingly pale, but his hair provided a stark contrast as it draped over his broad shoulders in inky waves.

Airplane's heart stuttered in his chest. The musk of this beefy man in front of him clouded his senses. He became uncomfortably warm. Maybe getting overpowered *wouldn't* be such a bad thing—

Suddenly, the man's eyes softened, his eyebrows relaxed. He spoke, his voice relieved and breathy. "Shang Qinghua."

Airplane's brow furrowed. *Shang Qinghua* ? That Peak Lord from An Ding Peak who aligned himself with the Demon Realm? He practically sold his soul and his dignity for some fame in the underworld! Airplane wasn't a cowardly prick like that guy. Also, what was this guy doing calling Shang Qinghua so affectionately? "I'm not—" he whispered. He couldn't say anything more.

The man's gaze trailed down Airplane's body, lingering on the shorts bunched up around his thighs. His pupils darkened at the same time his eyes narrowed. "What are you wearing, Qinghua?"

Again with the name… He pulled on the hem of his shorts. This wasn't anything scandalous, but with the way this guy looked at him like he was his next meal he couldn't be too careful. "My name isn't Shang Qinghua." He said, but his voice shook.

The man's dark eyebrows drew together. His frown deepened. Once again, his gaze raked over Airplane's frame. When he returned to lock eyes with the trembling author, his lips parted in realization. "You…" he started, but trailed off. He leaned backwards, and Airplane was simultaneously grateful for the space and regretful that he couldn't linger in the powerful presence longer.

He miraculously scraped together an iota of courage. Just who was this stranger bursting into his apartment in a shower of icy blue sparks!? This author demanded an explanation. Sure, the guy could crush him with a flick of his hand, but Airplane had *the right to know* , okay?

He swallowed roughly. “Who are you?” His voice was shakier than he’d like to admit. If he said the wrong thing…it really could be game over for him!

The attractive stranger lifted his pointy chin, as if disgusted by Airplane’s ignorance. “I am the ruler of the Northern Kingdom.”

Mobei-Jun . Of course . Something broiling hot shot straight down into Airplane’s stomach. Damn. He knew he described Mobei-Jun well and portrayed him to be as handsome as a god, but him in the flesh? Airplane’s throat ran dry. But what was he doing here? How was this Demon in one place one second and in his bedroom the next? “M-My King?” Airplane choked. He didn’t know where the words came from, they spilled from his lips as naturally as milk flowed from a cow’s teat.

Huh. What an interesting simile. *Focus* !

A haughty smirk tugged at the corner of Mobei-Jun’s lips at the title. “Mn.” But the delicious quirk of his mouth didn’t last. He seemed to be battling with something. He continued to stare at Airplane unabashedly, studying him.

Airplane squirmed under his scrutiny. What was there to study? What the fuck was this weird-ass Mobei-Jun cosplayer doing in his room in the early hours of the morning? Why did he seem so…accurate?

It was silent for a moment, save for the panicked breaths of Airplane and the jillions of unorganized thoughts running through his head. He couldn’t select one to focus on first. He had far too many questions and didn’t want to risk trying to collect answers. Can’t a man save his own ass instead of solving a mystery?

A nervous laugh spilled from his lips. “Haha, anyway, my King, if you could just kindly escort yourself out–”

Still crouched in front of Airplane’s shaky body, Mobei-Jun hovered over him. He was even more menacing with his long hair drawing around them like a curtain. Menacing but irrefutably good-looking. Airplane wasn’t sure whether to swoon and let his stomach dip in interest or say his final prayers. “Where is Qinghua?”

This was getting a little awkward. Airplane wasn’t sure where this sudden obsession was coming from. His patience was wearing thin with the whole situation. He was too sleep deprived and too confused to put together this mental puzzle. “I already said, he’s not here. He doesn’t fucking exist.” Okay, that came out snippier than he would’ve liked.

Something dangerous flamed in Mobei-Jun’s dark eyes. In a flash, his clawed hand raised to latch itself around Airplane’s throat. “What did you do with him?” he seethed.

Airplane flailed and scratched at Mobei-Jun’s immovable arms. His forearm was a fucking tree trunk! “M-my King, m-mercy–! Please!” He should’ve watched his words earlier!

What did he mean do with *him* ? With the squealing rat Peak Lord Shang Qinghua? He died long ago! Mobei-Jun had killed him after he had exhausted his services! That was so long

ago already! What did he mean he still had reasons to keep that guy around?

Airplane feared for his life, of course, but his carefully-constructed plot was flashing before his eyes.

His life was graciously spared when Mobei-Jun appeared to stumble. He stood with astonishing speed before perching himself on the edge of Airplane's rickety bed. His long fingers cradled his forehead.

Now would've been the perfect time to grab his phone, run away, and call the proper authorities, but Airplane couldn't bring himself to leave the man for some reason. There was something about this wall of beefy muscle that piqued his interest.

Airplane watched Mobei-Jun for only a moment before he snapped and remembered something important. With no regard for the hulking demon bending the frame of his bed, Airplane dashed toward the desk.

"Fried—! Completely fried!"

A gentle stream of smoke danced from his keyboard. The screen, frozen in a half blue, half document filled with words glitch.

He scrambled to think of what to do. Would wiping off the keyboard help? Was there a 24-hour repair shop? In this big city, it was possible. He patted his pockets for his phone, not finding it.

Right ! He left it on the bed. Airplane whirled around, having forgotten the presence of the Ice King lurking behind him. Upon taking one hasty step in the direction of the sheets he desperately needed to change, Mobei-Jun shot him a nasty glare.

Okay. No phone then.

Airplane practically whimpered with the loss. Any chances at getting his computer repaired were obliterated if he couldn't even check to see if there were any shops that could help him in his time of need.

So he sat himself down on his swivel chair, knees knocking anxiously together. His fingernails found their way into his mouth and he drilled them all to nubs in a way he hadn't since he was a kid.

Mobei-Jun said nothing, of course, just continued to glare quizzically at Airplane, occasionally harrumphing and growling low under his breath.

It was like he was a wolf eyeing its prey. Airplane felt incredibly exposed and vulnerable under this man's stare who was looking more and more like his legitimate character by the second.

It occurred to him that this could actually be some elaborate hallucination and he had managed to somehow collapse onto his bed instead of making those fortuitous instant

noodles and cracking open another energy drink. Maybe his head was actually resting on that lumpy pillow with the covers drawn up to his ears.

It was nice to imagine such.

The reality was that there *was* , in fact, a stranger still sitting on his bed, glower never lessening.

After sitting in painful silence, Mobei-Jun stood from the rickety bed and appeared before him in a flash. His claws wrapped around the armrests of Airplane's chair, boxing him in.

Inwardly, Airplane shed a few tears at the way the armrests groaned under Mobei-Jun's grip. He'd endured too many things for this chair to just crumble into dust at the hands of his own creation!

"Where am I." Mobei-Jun said. It was a demand, not a question.

Airplane's heart fluttered around his chest like an anxious bird. "I-in China! You're still in China!"

Mobei-Jun's arm whipped out, knocking Airplane to the ground. His limbs sprawled around him in a star-like formation, ears ringing from sleep deprivation and the blow. The instant he could, he leapt to his knees, rubbing his hands together so aggressively it was a wonder fire didn't start to burn from his palms. "Mercy, my King!" He babbled again.

Mobei-Jun replaced Airplane on the swivel chair, probably noting it was grander than the bed he was on earlier. More fit for a king like him. His scowl deepened. Maybe Airplane wasn't groveling hard enough.

"What do you need? I'll do anything!" He spluttered, clinging helplessly to Mobei-Jun's firm calf.

At the action, something strange happened in Mobei-Jun's face, almost like he was remembering something. His eyebrows twitched and that deep frown wavered. He leaned down to grasp the front of Airplane's shirt. Then he yanked him up so they were face to face.

Airplane's hands latched onto the first thing they could find, which just happened to be the Ice King's muscular thighs. They were…very solid. Airplane very quickly recalled that Mobei-Jun was modeled after his dream man…And what a dream he was…

One hand gripped his jaw, turning Airplane's face this way and that. He appeared to be scrutinizing him. Airplane had the odd sensation of being prodded like a pig getting inspected for slaughter.

Mobei-Jun hmphed. "You are Qinghua."

Airplane swallowed, sweat beading at his temple. "I-I'm really not…"

Mobei-Jun's palms skirted up and down Airplane's biceps. He offered a few–threatening? reassuring?–squeezes. "You are."

An unexpected lurch in Airplane's chest almost made him believe this fucking weirdo. No! This…this was gaslighting!

Mobei-Jun's lips parted in a weak sigh. "My Qinghua," his thumb pressed against Airplane's bottom lip so hard it almost hurt.

A wave of vicious heat rolled through his body. Airplane worried he would spontaneously combust with one more touch, one more dark look.

Maybe…he was Shang Qinghua. Being Shang Qinghua wouldn't be so bad, right?

No ! How many times did Airplane have to remind himself of the An Ding Peak Lord's fate!? After some time, Mobei-Jun would toss his still-warm corpse to the demon-infested streets where he would eventually end up chopped up and on someone's plate!

He struggled pathetically in his hold. His fingers dug into those firm thighs, unmoving.

Mobei-Jun's powerful hands engulfed Airplane's arms like they were nothing more than toothpicks. If he was snapped in half by Mobei-Jun, Airplane didn't think he would mind! "This King," Mobei-Jun rumbled, "has waited for his Qinghua for a long time."

Dread seeped into Airplane's chest. Didn't he write Mobei-Jun to abuse and beat his rat-like servant every chance he got? Wasn't Shang Qinghua just a footstool for him?

But—but—this was his most cherished character! Surely he wouldn't lay a hand on him with malicious intent, right? He remembered those war crimes Mobei-Jun committed that *he* wrote.

Blessedly, Mobei-Jun didn't hit him again. Not yet, at least. Airplane couldn't help but look at him, mesmerized at his perfection.

It felt strangely nice to be called *someone's.* Never had someone so openly expressed affection towards him. No friends, no marriage prospects, no family, only a few positive comments on his web novels and beloved children he created to keep him company. He momentarily forgot about the ruthless killer right in front of his eyes.

Aha! But wait! There were things he needed to know!

"Just," Airplane shifted in Mobei-Jun's unwavering grasp, "let this gracious King explain." Was he laying it on too thick? One peek at Mobei-Jun's arched eyebrow told him maybe he wasn't laying it on thick *enough* . "How did this King come here?"

He hummed again. "If this King were not destined to be with Qinghua, why would this King be here?"

The logic was simple. Maddeningly so. It was exactly the kind of conclusion his character Mobei-Jun would come to. The man hated work. If something fell so perfectly into his lap, then it must be fate. Destiny. Serendipity. All those other words.

Airplane still couldn't wrap his brain around it. Of course Mobei-Jun wouldn't worry himself with the logistics. But Airplane was *all about* logistics. "Where were you before this?" Airplane knew the answer. If it was what he thought, Mobei-Jun would have been fervently fucking some new harem member with Luo Binghe.

Mobei-Jun tongued his cheek. His patience was wearing thin. "This King was preparing for bed." He looped his arm around Airplane's waist, nearly dragging him into his lap. "He was wishing for his Qinghua to cease his work and…" He trailed off, apparently thinking better of finishing his sentence.

The implication left Airplane's head spinning.

This just reminded Airplane of the *glaring* question: if he claimed Airplane was Shang Qinghua, why was he acting so affectionate towards him? Airplane had never written or even hinted at some kind of deeper relationship between the two. Shang Qinghua was nothing more than a parasite on Mobei-Jun's back who provided information about Cang Qiong Mountain until he was deemed useless. Then he was scrapped, his corpse not even receiving a proper burial. Shang Qinghua was nothing more than cannon fodder and a one-time plot device!

And Airplane hadn't written such a scene. Nowhere in Mobei-Jun's psyche had Airplane created a desire and longing for his pathetic, groveling servant. Unless Mobei-Jun's intentions were malicious. But even then, why would he not just use Shang Qinghua as a fuck toy if he so desired?

There were so many things he had yet to understand.

But Mobei-Jun's eyes had hardened again. "Prepare this King for bed." He shoved him away.

There was nothing Airplane could do! Just for now, he would submit to this demon until he could find a way to escape his dominating presence.

Just for now, he would surrender to his King.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again always and forever to J who encouraged me to scrap most of the OG version of this chapter with the very OOC MBJ and rewrite it :')

Chapter 22: Knockout pt. 1

Chapter Notes

I don't know ANYTHING about MMA please don't come for me

“Got everything?”

Liu Qingge shrugged a duffel bag over his shoulder. They had bought it just a few days ago and it was filled with practically all of his belongings. Except for Cheng Luan. Fuck Cheng Luan. That sword wasn’t coming along if Shen Yuan could help it. That’d be the fast track to a jail cell. He nodded just once.

Shen Yuan bit back a yawn, his face stretching and contorting. It was painfully early in the morning. On most nights, Shen Yuan wouldn’t have even gone to bed by this time, but now here he was, wide awake and running on a tasty three hours of sleep. He’d have to find a vending machine and grab some canned coffee or an energy drink or something.

Shen Yuan’s own suitcase was zipped up and prepped to go on a journey. Inside, he shoved in all the contents from his underwear drawer and then some. He took his laptop, just in case; his e-reader, just in case; and his shaving kit, just in case. He never got anything more than some peach fuzz above his lip, but they were going away for *two whole days* . Anything could happen in those days. He packed other things of course, his necessities, but they weren’t worth mentioning. It had been a while since he’d gone on a family vacation.

This wasn’t a family vacation, though. Liu Qingge had received an offer to participate in a national MMA competition. How could they not go?! The prize money was a mouth-watering amount. Shen Yuan’s eyes had bugged out of his skull when they saw that number on the flyer.

Screw the transportation, hotel, and entrance fees, Shen Yuan wanted his hands on that sweet, sweet payout.

So, after some convincing, Shen Yuan had signed Liu Qingge up. Shen Yuan would act as his coach even though Liu Qingge didn’t need one. He would just slap his shoulders and scream from the sidelines like they did in the movies.

Shen Yuan couldn’t help but feel like an unassuming dance mom. He had no idea what he’d gotten Liu Qingge into. They had to buy all sorts of equipment and materials for this competition, and Liu Qingge went on a careful diet to meet a certain weight requirement. He spent even more time at the gym than usual which was both a blessing and a curse for Shen Yuan’s sanity. Finally, he had some peace and quiet where he didn’t have to think hard about Their Whole Dynamic, but it was oddly lonely not having him nearby.

The two took the subway to the train station, only a few stops away. The subway's cars were blessedly empty, so Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge could relax on the seats. The second he sat down, he had to resist the urge to close his eyes and curl up in a tight ball.

He watched the subway tunnel whiz by through the windows. Liu Qingge sat beside him, back ramrod straight and arms crossed.

"Are you nervous?" Shen Yuan asked.

Liu Qingge shot him a glance. He grunted.

Never mind, then.

He didn't attempt to make any more conversation, even after they bought their tickets at the station and hopped on the train.

Liu Qingge tossed his bag onto the rack above their heads and settled down. Shen Yuan struggled a little more. Weak from lack of sleep and just weak full stop, his limbs trembled as he hoisted the suitcase over his head.

The train lurched and Shen Yuan stumbled. He yelped, fearing the worst, but a solid arm looped around his waist and held him steady. Before the suitcase could tumble to the ground, Liu Qingge grabbed it with his free hand, muscles straining.

He hovered over Shen Yuan, lips parted in concern.

Shen Yuan groaned internally. It was too early in the morning for this! An earlier check in the bathroom mirror revealed Shen Yuan had dark bags under his eyes, hair unkempt. But Liu Qingge in all his glory was pristine and radiant. An open window let in a stream of air that danced around Liu Qingge's ponytail.

Was this a Korean drama!? What was with this setting?

Shen Yuan wrestled out of Liu Qingge's addicting hold, face warm. He flopped into his seat after Liu Qingge slid the suitcase onto the rack with infuriating ease. Liu Qingge sat by the window, watching the city, then countryside pass.

A train attendant rolled by with a cart. Shen Yuan rustled in his pockets for his wallet and ordered two canned coffees. After cracking the tab, he passed one to Liu Qingge. The man sipped, then hummed.

Shen Yuan reached for his phone, scanning his emails. "It says here that your first fight is against someone named," he paused, "The Exterminator."

Liu Qingge huffed. Was it a laugh? Shen Yuan wasn't sure, but it was an appropriate response.

"He's won a lot of matches, both regional and national. He's pretty new to the MMA scene." A quick type of his name into a search engine showed photos of the man. Shen Yuan

grimaced at the image. The poor The Exterminator wouldn't be winning any beauty pageants anytime soon. "Take a look." He thrust the phone into Liu Qingge's face.

Liu Qingge's lips curled in a rare display of disgust. The sight made laughter bubble in Shen Yuan's chest. Catching him off guard was so fun! "That's…unfortunate," was all he said in response.

Shen Yuan agreed, but in truth, he was nervous for Liu Qingge. This guy looked menacing. Liu Qingge was strong, but from a glance, people couldn't tell. He was a slim pretty-boy with long eyelashes and plush lips and a mean glare. But underneath his t-shirts he was rock solid.

The Exterminator fit the part more than Liu Qingge did. He was massive, even in his headshot. He boasted a cocky grin that warped the tattoos crawling up his face. In another full-body picture, his shoulders were two and a half times the size of his waist, which was already wide enough. How had he possibly been placed in the same category as Liu Qingge? The man was a *tank* .

If he looked at the man any longer, he would have nightmares for a week. "So," he said, attempting to stir up conversation. They did have three hours left of the train ride. "Do you think you're going to make it to the final round?"

The corner of Liu Qingge's lip twitched. In annoyance or mirth, Shen Yuan couldn't tell. His eyes glittered darkly. "I'm the Bai Zhan War God. I'm going to be the fucking champion."

An excited shiver ran down Shen Yuan's spine and settled somewhere in his groin. He had an inkling that this holiday would be one for the books.

Some time later, Shen Yuan woke with a crick in his neck to the sound of his name.

"Shen Yuan," Liu Qingge muttered, shrugging his shoulder, bouncing his head.

When had he fallen asleep? When had he fallen asleep on *Liu Qingge's shoulder* ? Panicked, he gauged Liu Qingge's reaction. What was this? His throat wasn't slit while he slept? He hadn't been assaulted?

Instead, Liu Qingge stared down at him in amusement. "We're almost at the station."

Shen Yuan's chest squeezed. "T-thanks for waking me up." Oh god, did he drool? Was there drool on Liu Qingge's precious shoulder? Before he could investigate, Liu Qingge stood and got their baggage from the racks above them.

One taxi ride later, they arrived at the venue.

"I don't think check-in at the hotel is available yet, so we can't drop off our stuff," Shen Yuan said, peering at the time on his phone. "We'll have to just take our luggage with us until your match is over."

They had a few hours to prepare; signing in, being guided to the locker rooms, given a small tour of the building.

Everyone seemed friendly enough, but Shen Yuan felt on edge with all the tall, buff men surrounding him at every corner. Everyone here, including the coaches, were muscular and confident. They fit right in. Shen Yuan, in his graphic tee and basketball shorts, glasses sliding precariously down his nose, shifted his weight.

He felt Liu Qingge's probing eyes on him.

"What now?" Shen Yuan muttered, lip curling. He followed Liu Qingge to the bath. He was close to his ideal weigh-in weight, but not quite close enough. Later, he'd run a few laps around the building.

Liu Qingge didn't so much as wince as he unceremoniously settled into the broiling water. His skin flushed pink. "You look nervous." It wasn't accusatory, or mocking, surprisingly enough.

Shen Yuan toyed with the lanyard he'd been given around his fingers. On a laminated piece of paper, it declared him as the coach for Liu Qingge, a blatant lie. Less of a coach, more of a lazy cheerleader. He snorted. "Well, yeah, I'm going to watch you get flattened like a pancake."

Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow but didn't ask what a pancake was. Shen Yuan made a mental note to make some for him another time. Maybe for breakfast when they get back… "Shen Yuan," he said. He crossed his arms on the edge of the tub, resting his tilted chin on his wrists. The action was borderline coquettish. A smile danced at the corners of his mouth. "Did you already forget you're talking to the Bai Zhan War God?"

Someone had actually, genuinely, literally taken a flamethrower and lit Shen Yuan's face on fire. This was the closest Liu Qingge got to flirting, and Shen Yuan was *extremely* susceptible to it. He stared at the pale knuckles that his lanyard was now twisted around. "How could I?" He mumbled, barely opening his lips.

"What was that?"

"I said *'get fucked'* ."

Shen Yuan checked the timetable on his phone while Liu Qingge made easy work of sprinting around the building. Shen Yuan had lost count of how many times he'd completed a lap.

Their schedule tomorrow was similar to today's: they had all the morning and afternoon free, the weigh-in in the early evening, and one of the first matches of the evening. That was kind of nice. Maybe they could go to the beach together. Even though they didn't have to go *together* . Shen Yuan was just thinking that to be kind. He couldn't care less if Liu Qingge spent time with him at the beach in all his shirtless glory or not!

"We should go to the weigh-in," Shen Yuan called as Liu Qingge passed by him. Liu Qingge nodded, but sprinted around the building one more time for good measure.

He joined Shen Yuan by the doors not long after.

God, this was torture. Liu Qingge looked so good. Better than words could describe. His torso was damp from exertion, but he stood tall and unaffected. The guy's stamina was… insane.

"Inside," Shen Yuan squeaked.

The hall was already packed with audience members. Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge were ushered behind some curtains to get Liu Qingge changed into the appropriate garments. Those being even tighter black shorts that wrapped delectably around his thighs and his gloves, shiny with oil.

A staff member guided Liu Qingge to the edge of the platform.

"You got this!" Shen Yuan offered what he hoped was an assuring smile. It was hard to discern because his palms were sweaty with anxiety.

Liu Qingge scoffed. "Of course I do." And he walked on the stage.

Shen Yuan could've swooned.

There was polite applause and a few cheers as Liu Qingge took the stage. It was only natural, as he hadn't been in the MMA scene for very long to make a name for himself. He didn't wave, or engage with the audience at all, really.

He was weighed with speedy efficiency. Shen Yuan worried his bottom lip between his teeth. Would he make it? Did the coffee on the train ride screw him over? Would Liu Qingge be too heavy for the category? Too light? Would he—

"He's in!" The commentator roared into the microphone.

He felt like he was going to pass out from the stress of it all. Fuck his earlier doubts, he felt more like Liu Qingge's anxious girlfriend than a lazy cheerleader.

In a blur, they were led down the ramps to the center of the arena. Liu Qingge dumped his stuff on his designated chair. He rewrapped the bandages around his knuckles with quick, practiced movements.

Shen Yuan's anxiety expanded to every nerve in his body. He was practically shaking. What a sight for the audience; this tiny, scrawny coach trembling while trying to encourage his fighter! "R-remember to, uh, listen to the referee."

Liu Qingge hummed.

"And to, uh, follow the rules."

Liu Qingge stretched his arms over his head.

"And to win."

Liu Qingge turned to face him, head on. His eyes were full of that glittering determination again. “I was *born* to win.” And he crawled between the ropes to join his massive opponent.

Shen Yuan didn’t have time to collect himself before the referee raised his hand and blew his whistle. The match started.

What Liu Qingge lacked in physical broadness, he made up for in speed. Within the first three minutes of the first round The Exterminator hadn’t landed a single blow. Liu Qingge ducked and dodged; fists tucked tight in front of his face.

The first time Shen Yuan had watched Liu Qingge fight, it was an informal competition, just between a few gyms. He wore a compression shirt last time, but here, in legitimate MMA, fighters could only wear some gloves that allowed for gripping and some tight shorts.

From his position, Shen Yuan had a devastatingly good view of Liu Qingge in all his glory. His abdomen was tight and engaged, thighs flexed as he danced from side to side. If he was someone who didn’t know Liu Qingge, the scars peppering his torso would only add to the intrigue. Heck, Shen Yuan knew Liu Qingge and *he* was intrigued at the sight. The way those muscles pulled and stretched with each movement. He opted to tie his hair into a pretty bun instead of the ponytail. Initially, Shen Yuan was sad at the loss of the swinging ponytail, but this way he could consistently see the slope of Liu Qingge’s neck and watch the sweat run down it.

It was tantalizing. *He* was tantalizing.

He lurched from his daydreaming when he saw Liu Qingge make his move. He had tired out The Exterminator with his weaving and side-steps, so while the bigger man panted and huffed, Liu Qingge drew his arm back and swung.

His blow landed right on the ribs! Shen Yuan seemed to float on air. Liu Qingge had struck!

The Exterminator winced, but continued his offense. Quicker now, Liu Qingge delivered more punches and kicks on The Exterminator’s vital points. Each hit in quick succession made Shen Yuan’s throat grow tighter and tighter.

The crowd grew restless at the scene. Such a beautiful and lithe man could take down an opponent at the top of their weight category! Shen Yuan matched their excitement.

Liu Qingge thrust the heel of his hand directly into The Exterminator’s solar plexus, sending his adversary tumbling backwards until he collapsed onto the mat. He struggled to lift his head, gloved palm clutching at his chest.

He could feel a ripple through the audience. Just who was this Liu Qingge who had seemingly come out of nowhere and exterminated The Exterminator? The referee came then and, after concluding that The Exterminator had been extinguished, lifted Liu Qingge’s wrist into the air, declaring him victorious.

And only in the first round! Shen Yuan was truly amazed just as everyone else. He had only seen a few of Liu Qingge’s matches before this bigger competition and while each one was

mesmerizing, this one took the cake. Liu Qingge was powerful. More powerful than Shen Yuan could have known.

Liu Qingge stepped through the ropes of the cage, removing his mouthpiece in the process. Shen Yuan looked at Liu Qingge like he was the galaxy.

“You were…” Shen Yuan started amidst the roaring of the crowd. He couldn’t finish. All these adjectives came to his head, but none of them seemed right. None of them could encapsulate what Shen Yuan witnessed on that mat. Words fell short.

Sweat trickled down the planes of Liu Qingge’s torso. His chest heaved as he stared Shen Yuan up and down. Realizing Shen Yuan had nothing more to say, he sniffed and took the towel hanging limply from Shen Yuan’s hands. He wiped at his forehead, the back of his neck.

After too long of a pause, Shen Yuan gathered himself. “Are you hungry?” He squeaked, shoving Liu Qingge’s gloves into his duffel bag.

Liu Qingge nodded and wiped his hands on his shorts. Shen Yuan tried to avoid tracking the movement, lest he become unable to tear his gaze away from Liu Qingge’s strong thighs.

Before the reporters could interrogate him, Shen Yuan looped his arm around Liu Qingge’s waist and led him back to the locker rooms. He knew the last thing Liu Qingge wanted was numerous interviews and microphones shoved in his face.

Even after he’d showered and changed, Liu Qingge glowed with pride. He was exhilarated and energized, rolling his neck and shaking out his limbs. He wasn’t smiling, but there was a passion exuding from his form that was impossible to ignore. Shen Yuan laughed at how boyish he looked.

Without being noticed, they’d slipped out of the locker rooms after grabbing their luggage into the humid evening air. The last streaks of sun painted the horizon. The Yellow Sea’s wind whipped Liu Qingge’s ponytail around his head, carrying the scent of salt and fish to their noses.

Hm. Fish. “Should we get some seafood?” Shen Yuan’s mouth watered at the thought of flaky fish, hot and spicy seafood stew.

Liu Qingge hummed. “I don’t want to go out anymore. Let’s get food inside the room.”

Shen Yuan’s heart sank, but he grudgingly understood. There was nothing he wanted more than a hot, fresh bowl of mussels soaked in broth by the seaside, but Liu Qingge looked exhausted. He was still riding the high of his win, but with getting up early and the adrenaline from a professional fight, of course he would want to just rest. Besides, he had at least one match tomorrow; two if he won the one earlier in the evening.

He sent a prayer to the sky for the seafood that wouldn’t make it to his belly.

The resort was pretty nice, and only a short walk from the arena. It was easy to carry their luggage to the entrance and check in.

Shen Yuan's parents' money always came in handy for something like this. The two rode the elevator to one of the uppermost floors. Shen Yuan had arranged for a suite online, one with a private balcony hot tub where they could stare out onto the sea's horizon. Maybe have a celebratory drink.

"This is one of the nicest rooms they have to offer," he told Liu Qingge, swiping the key card.

The door swung open.

The room was pristine and polished. The floors were a shiny white marble, complemented by modern, streamlined furniture and abstract art. Shen Yuan's eyes flicked to the balcony and, sure enough, caught a glimpse of the elevated hot tub he would *definitely* take a soak in before they left.

As he went to survey the rest of the room, he bumped into Liu Qingge's solid back. What was he—?

Oh.

Maybe Shen Yuan hadn't checked the website carefully enough.

In the center of the room was a nice, queen-size bed. Sure, that's what he wanted. What he *didn't* want, or anticipate in any way, shape, or form, was the fact that there was only *one* queen-sized bed.

This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be true. The rose petals scattered artfully across the sheets seemed like a joke. Wearily, he scanned the rest of the suite. No couch, no lounges, just a small table with three metal chairs, a kitchenette, a bathroom.

He scrambled to the telephone at the bedside table. Maybe they could make a change. *Please, please, please, please* —!

But after a short conversation, his fears were confirmed. The whole hotel was booked up because of the MMA event.

Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge were stuck together in the Honeymoon Suite.

Shen Yuan's suitcase clattered to the marble floor. Liu Qingge's duffel bag followed suit. They looked at each other, slowly, in unison. This was something that would send Shen Yuan crying from laughter onto the floor if he saw it in a comedy film. Now he just wanted to cry.

Sharing a bed with Liu Qingge…

Shen Yuan hadn't even dared to consider that after months of sleeping on the sectional couch in his apartment. It never seemed like an option.

Then again, the thought of sleeping beside Liu Qingge wasn't a *totally* unwelcome idea. He knew firsthand that the man was warm and solid; he could likely provide comfort in the chill of night.

Now he sounded like a desperate maiden!

He was in pure disbelief. "What do we—"

"I guess we'll have to share it." Liu Qingge decided for them. He delivered the words matter-of-factly, impartial.

Oh. Okay. If Liu Qingge could be neutral about it, then it would be fine. At least he wasn't retching violently at the idea of sharing sheets with Shen Yuan. He plunked himself down at the table and rifled through the room service menu upon it. "This one," he demanded.

Shen Yuan took a peek. Pasta? Had Liu Qingge ever had pasta before? Did he know what he was even ordering?

But Shen Yuan was an obedient slave to his money-maker, and he called the reception to get the meal sent up.

They ate in silence.

Shen Yuan didn't know what Liu Qingge was thinking of, but Shen Yuan's mind was filled with conflicting thoughts of getting strangled in his sleep or being held warmly in Liu Qingge's muscular arms.

Liu Qingge was probably thinking of battle strategies, for all he knew.

Shen Yuan stacked the empty plates and cutlery back onto the tray and wheeled it outside the door once they finished, fat and happy. That was more cleaning than he ever did at his own goddamn apartment. He wiped the table with some spare napkins while Liu Qingge paced around the spacious room.

Liu Qingge rolled his shoulders, groaning lowly. The sound did something silly to Shen Yuan's stomach. "Are you sore?" He asked.

"I'm fine," he grunted, continuing to stretch. But Shen Yuan caught the twitching and winching of his eyes with each movement.

He sighed. "Here. Let me help you." Shen Yuan smoothed the blankets on the bed. "Lie down and I'll give you a massage."

Liu Qingge held his gaze for a long moment before turning away with pink cheeks.

Understanding unfurled in Shen Yuan's brain. "N-not *that* kind of massage, you pervert!" What was this guy thinking? Though when the thought crossed his mind, he grew equally, if not more rosy.

Hesitantly, Liu Qingge lay on his stomach, muscles tensed as hard as rocks. He rested his forehead on his arms and his fingers curled the sheets into fists.

Jesus, Shen Yuan hadn't even touched him yet and he was already as wound up as a clock. After leaving him to lie on the bed, Liu Qingge finally sunk into the mattress. However, as soon as Shen Yuan put a knee on the bed to crawl on top, the man tensed up so hard he trembled. "Dude, chill." He splayed a hand between Liu Qingge's shoulder blades, feeling the man shudder beneath him.

"Just relax," he whispered, pressing his thumbs along Liu Qingge's spine. He dug in hard to find those sore spots underneath the solid muscle. He must've found one because Liu Qingge twisted his waist.

Shen Yuan continued in this manner, working his way up and down Liu Qingge's spine, following the natural shapes of the muscles on his back. It was difficult with the shirt, but Shen Yuan didn't dare touch Liu Qingge's skin. Too many things could happen, welcome or unwelcome.

He finally worked at the tight tendons by Liu Qingge's neck. He swallowed, resisting the urge to press his mouth against a pretty mole behind Liu Qingge's ear. How would the man react if Shen Yuan gave in?

Liu Qingge sighed at the dig of Shen Yuan's fingers, snapping him from his lustful thoughts.

That was close , Shen Yuan's chest tightened. Oh god. If he wasn't careful, he'd jump Liu Qingge's bones. *Okay, okay, get away from the mole* .

He moved back down to Liu Qingge's hips. His shirt rode up, revealing the tapered ends of scars. Shen Yuan often mused how he got them. From fighting in his past life? Did each scar have a different story? A victory? A loss? Before he could stop himself, Shen Yuan allowed the tip of his finger to trace along it.

Liu Qingge's hand whipped up to wrap around Shen Yuan's wrist in an iron grip. "Stop," he hissed.

Oh, fuck. Busted. "What's wrong?"

The man sat up, sending Shen Yuan tumbling. Fire blazed in his eyes. He leaned forward until Shen Yuan was propping himself up with his elbows on the mattress. Shen Yuan's heart pounded until all he heard was the sound of it in his ears. His gut twisted and turned like he was on a rollercoaster ride. The last time Liu Qingge had hovered over him in this kind of position they… they had…

Shen Yuan pressed a hand to Liu Qingge's mouth. "Wait," he laughed, nervously, "what are you doing?"

Liu Qingge shook his head and peeled off Shen Yuan's fingers. "No," he huffed, eyebrows knotting together. "I'm not letting you get away again."

He descended, parting his lips over Shen Yuan's.

Instantly, Shen Yuan closed his eyes against his better judgement. His spine arched into Liu Qingge's awaiting palms, and he felt Shen Yuan's shuddering torso over his clothes.

Any thoughts he had were slow, like they were trying to swim in Jell-O. His whole body was on fire with Liu Qingge's kisses and hands running along him.

Liu Qingge's hot tongue licked the seam of Shen Yuan's mouth, slipping inside once Shen Yuan sighed his name.

He paused, giving Shen Yuan one last parting press with his tongue against the roof of Shen Yuan's mouth and drew back, hands lingering on his waist.

What a sight Shen Yuan must've been. His face was flushed with heat, mouth open and panting. He vaguely registered that his shirt was bunched up above his hips. With one shift of his thumb, Liu Qingge could've dug into the skin above his hip bone, but he didn't. Why didn't he?

The darkness cleared from Liu Qingge's gaze, replaced with something else he couldn't understand in his hazy state.

Liu Qingge shook his head, differently than before, sitting back on his haunches. Shen Yuan caught a glimpse of a bulge in Liu Qingge's shorts, but it disappeared when he slid off the bed with all the elegance of a jungle cat and stalked to the bathroom.

Where was he going? Shen Yuan sat up to analyze the situation in his own pants. Yup, he was half-hard only from a little kissing. Liu Qingge sure was talented.

He lay motionless on the bed, waiting for Liu Qingge's return. He waited even after he heard the rumble of the bathroom fan and the steady shower of water hit the tiles of the wall.

Liu Qingge was in there for a long time. Long enough to make Shen Yuan feel silly. And not the fun kind of giddy-silly, but the cold wash of embarrassment-silly. What had he expected to happen? For Liu Qingge to fuck him into the mattress until they broke the bed? For him to at least say *his* name this time?

Foolish, just foolish.

Tears of humiliation burn his eyes. Then tears of humiliation for his tears of humiliation follow afterwards. A grown-ass man crying over not getting laid.

No, it was more than that.

Deep down, there was this icy nervousness that left him clammy. Screw practicing good oral hygiene, Shen Yuan was going to sleep off the hurt.

He changed into his pajamas and curled up in a tight ball on his edge of the mattress. His brain ran in overdrive, confused. Did Liu Qingge not want him? Even after that drunken

apology/confession, did he still crave Shen Qingqiu? Anxiety poked at his stomach. He felt like he was going to vomit.

He squeezed his stinging eyes shut as Liu Qingge exited the bathroom. He heard the man pause for only a moment before lifting the covers and settling into the bed beside him.

He said nothing. No small talk. No awkward joke about sharing a bed. No apology.

An embarrassing tear finally slid over the bump of his nose and down the opposite cheek. Along with the thick emotions of the past fifteen minutes, the day's exhaustion and lack of sleep finally caught up to him. Shen Yuan closed his eyes and succumbed to sleep.

Chapter 23: Knockout pt. 2

Chapter Notes

> fun fact about me: when i first started writing many years ago I had this stupid rule for myself that a chapter was only a chapter if it was at LEAST 1000 words long (that doesn't mean anything lol) so the second I hit 1000 words I would call the chapter done, but THIS project..... I never thought I was capable of writing 10k for a single chapter because it was never my style but..... yikes
>
> liushen will do that to ya, i guess

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liu Qingge was a disciplined man. He resisted urges. He had routines. He wasn't an animal. Very few things fazed him.

Liu Qingge was also a man.

His routine, at this beachside hotel, was ruined. His urges were flaring up. He felt feral. He was fazed.

And there was only one person to blame: Shen Yuan.

Sharing one bed was already something he wasn't accustomed to. But no kind of training could ever have prepared him for sharing a bed with Shen Yuan. For one, Liu Qingge often slept on his back, hands resting loosely on his abdomen; the perfect position in case he was ambushed. He could leap up with practiced skill, grab Cheng Luan, and defend himself.

This morning, with the sun warming his cheek through the gap in the curtains, proved to be different.

Limbs were tangled together. And not just Liu Qingge's limbs, because he only had four, but an extra four appendages were looped and twisted around his own.

From the very moment he woke up, Liu Qingge's heart stuttered erratically, the pillar between his legs abnormally hard.

As a disciplined Peak Lord, he was familiar with ignoring these urges unless the situation was truly dire. He only rarely allowed himself to indulge in such pleasures. But then Shen Yuan came along and soon Liu Qingge was rutting against him like an animal in heat; stroking himself to completion in the bathroom of a gym's locker room. Just one smile, one teasing comment from the man was all it took to get Liu Qingge stiff in his pants.

And, apparently, one innocent palm resting on his pectoral muscle and one innocent leg hooked around his thigh.

Fuck. He was, as Shen Yuan would say, up a creek.

It didn't help when he attempted to extract himself from the bed, Shen Yuan whined croakily in his sleep, latching onto Liu Qingge like a parasite. His face nuzzled into Liu Qingge's chest, hair tickling his neck. An involuntary shudder racked through his body.

He could relieve himself right here. With a few pumps and the scent of Shen Yuan invading his nostrils, it was more than likely he would spill all over his fist embarrassingly quick.

Liu Qingge considered it. Considered the humiliation of having to bite his tongue to stifle his groan as he came; considered risking getting his release on Shen Yuan's body for the momentary satisfaction.

He cringed at himself. Ew. He was better than this. He was a grown adult, for fuck's sake.

He took a few practiced breaths, willing the erection to go down. If he closed his eyes and counted as high as he could, he would feel better, but then Shen Yuan would whimper in his sleep and Liu Qingge's touch-deprived brain would imagine Shen Yuan making those noises as he fucked him into the mattress.

Nope, nope, nope.

Liu Qingge slithered out from underneath Shen Yuan. He observed a small frown at the corner of the sleeping man's lips, but steeled himself before he could give in and spend just a few more minutes wrapped in his embrace.

He turned the shower water on ice cold and watched his dick deflate until it hung limply between his legs.

He wasn't gentle with himself when he toweled off his body. He looked at the man in the bathroom mirror.

His hair hung down his shoulders, eye bags dark and swollen. The man in the mirror was frowning—he usually was—and his body was tense with stress.

Not a good look.

When he left the bathroom, Shen Yuan was already awake, hunched over his phone. He looked like a pale pink shrimp waiting to be tossed into a wok.

Liu Qingge was going to punch something.

"Oh, you're up." Shen Yuan said, tossing his phone onto the nightstand. "Come here, I'll do your hair."

Do his hair. If Shen Yuan was aware of their embracing earlier this morning, he didn't show it. Liu Qingge debated allowing himself to get close to Shen Yuan again. The best that could

happen: Shen Yuan does his hair and they make passionate love. The worst that could happen: Shen Yuan does his hair and they make passionate love. He couldn't bother to explain why one was ideal and the other was a nightmare without doing too much internal processing that would inevitably result in a headache.

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes. "Don't be difficult, just pull up a chair and sit your ass down."

He didn't say anything about last night. About Liu Qingge launching onto him and kissing him until his pretty lips turned a vibrant red.

God, when images of Shen Yuan beneath him flashed through his mind, it took every ounce of restraint not to pounce again like a wild animal. He almost wanted the man to wrinkle his nose in disgust so Liu Qingge could move on and take out his anger on his opponents tonight.

Clenching his jaw, Liu Qingge did just that: pulled up a chair and sat his ass down.

Shen Yuan wasn't rough or aggressive. His fingers carded through Liu Qingge's damp hair, untangling the knots. Instinctively, Liu Qingge's eyelids fluttered shut. Goosebumps trailed up the backs of his arms and his neck, and he willed them to go away with little success.

The man behind him finally started to gather strands at his temple to braid his hair. His fingernails occasionally scraped against Liu Qingge's skin. He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, biting back shaky sighs that threatened to slip out with each caress.

The braiding and securing of a ponytail took simultaneously painfully long and frustratingly short. His self-control was hanging on by a mere thread; one more touch and he'd be repeating last night's mistakes.

Blessedly, and disappointingly, Shen Yuan finally pulled back. "Yup, all good." All these conflicting emotions roiled in his gut. He shoved them down with a harsh swallow.

Though it was later than usual, Liu Qingge was still a naturally early riser, so he had a long period of time before his weigh ins and his first match in the evening. He couldn't be stuck in this hotel room if Shen Yuan was going to stay here.

"Wanna go out?" He asked, reading Liu Qingge's mind.

As long as you stay the fuck away from me because I'm a goddamn animal and can't control myself around you. "Yes."

Shen Yuan leapt from the bed with astounding ability. Never had the man moved so fast. "Should we go to the beach?"

The glaring sunshine in Liu Qingge's eyes was the last thing he wanted, in fact. He honestly just wanted to get to the gym and train until his muscles screamed.

"Don't worry," Shen Yuan seemed to pluck the idea from Liu Qingge's mind and swat it away, "we'll take you to the practice gym later to get your last-minute bulk."

Was he that transparent?

Shen Yuan shot a teasing grin in his direction before ducking into the bathroom to prepare for the day.

The morning and afternoon passed in a flurry of sand, waves, and seafood.

Finally, Shen Yuan kept his promise and Liu Qingge gathered his tapes and shoes and clothes to dash over to the gym, leaving Shen Yuan in a cloud of dust.

He dumped his duffel bag onto a bench, ignoring all the other competitors taking advantage of the facilities. Liu Qingge beelined towards the punching bags. He quickly claimed one and wrapped his knuckles tight. He didn't dare attempt to stop the corners of his mouth from turning up. Expelling energy like this was just so *satisfying*.

He lost himself in the punches and kicks, feeling his abdomen grow taut as he channeled the energy from there. All other commentary in the gym was lost on him.

That is, until Shen Yuan stood behind his punching bag, holding it steady. It almost seemed to dwarf him. He poked his head around the side, grinning widely. "You're pretty strong."

Liu Qingge scoffed. "I would hope so. I am the—"

"Bai Zhan War God, yes, yes." Shen Yuan's eyes rolled so far back in his head all Liu Qingge could see was white.

His mood soured. Where was all this sass coming from? "Move. The bag is gonna knock you out," He mumbled. His next blow was delivered with all the power he could muster, gauging Shen Yuan's reaction. Was he impressed?

Shen Yuan's face gave nothing away. "You keep doing your thing, I'll sit over there." He turned on his heel.

" *Wait* —" Liu Qingge blurted, way too loud for the gym. A few people turned in his direction and warmth flooded his face.

Shen Yuan peered over his shoulder.

Liu Qingge tongued his cheek, adjusting the wraps around his hands. "Spar with me." He would wrestle that sassy attitude right out of him.

Now Shen Yuan *really* looked at him. "What the fuck? I'll die!"

What had he roped himself into? He couldn't back out now that he'd made an absolute fool of himself. "It'll be…fun. I'll go easy on you." The mat was empty. "Come here."

With hesitant steps like a newborn fawn on shaky legs, Shen Yuan approached the mats. He looked extremely out of his element, pushing his glasses up his nose and tugging at the hem of his shirt.

The blue mat was springy and soft under Liu Qingge's bare feet. It felt comforting, grounding. "Take off your shoes and socks."

“Goodness, take me out for dinner first,” Shen Yuan quipped, but complied.

His words were like a fiery iron rod across his chest. Did Shen Yuan know how much he affected him? Based on the way he assaulted him last night he should know, right?

He couldn’t think about it for much longer because soon Shen Yuan was standing in front of him. He was attempting to appear nonchalant, but Liu Qingge noticed the faint sheen of sweat on his forehead and the way he worried his bottom lip between his teeth.

“I promise I won’t hurt you,” Liu Qingge said, softer. Even though he had hurt him plenty since knowing him.

“Fine.” Shen Yuan adopted an awkward stance, slightly crouched with his knees turned in and shoulders up by his ears. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Liu Qingge wanted to laugh but bit his tongue instead. If he made a comment about the way Shen Yuan was standing, he would probably pack up his things and hop on the next train back to the city.

They hovered there for a moment.

“You can…try to knock me down.” Liu Qingge finally said.

Shen Yuan swallowed. “I wasn’t really sure what I was supposed to do.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“…”

In their moment of awkwardness, Shen Yuan lunged. Liu Qingge allowed him to tackle him head-on, but he didn’t so much as shuffle his heel an inch backwards. Shen Yuan wrapped his arms tight around Liu Qingge’s torso, shoving with all his might. He felt nothing aside from the comfort of being held.

“Are you even trying right now?” He wheezed, already exerted.

Liu Qingge shrugged. “I said I’d go easy on you.”

“Come on!” Shen Yuan huffed, stepping back. His shirt was rumpled, revealing a sliver of skin above his hip. Just the tiniest amount. That little tease of tender flesh had Liu Qingge’s fists clenching at his sides. “It’s no fun if you half-ass it.” He paused. “No, you’re not even eighth-assing it.”

Well *that* he couldn’t stand for. “You want me to half-ass it?” He swept his leg in a clean arc along the floor, whipping Shen Yuan’s feet out from under him. He crashed to the mat with a *thud*.

A choked gasp weaseled its way out of Shen Yuan's throat while he winced. "Dude, that fucking *hurt*!"

"Wait until I *whole*-ass it." He offered his hand to help Shen Yuan up.

But Shen Yuan gripped hard onto his wrist and pushed at Liu Qingge's ankle until he tripped to the ground. He caught himself expertly, half draped over Shen Yuan. The man had bested him! "Good job," he smiled, meaning it.

Shen Yuan didn't get to revel in his victory for long because Liu Qingge wrapped his legs around Shen Yuan's scrawny bicep and trapped him in an armbar.

Immediately he started to thrash and whine. "*Mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy*!!" He floundered before slapping Liu Qingge's knee with rapid taps.

Liu Qingge enjoyed his struggle for a little longer before releasing him. Shen Yuan rolled away as far as he could.

"Okay, okay, wait, wait." He fumbled for his glasses and carefully folded them, placing them alongside Liu Qingge's duffle bag. "Now teach me whatever the fuck you just did."

Teaching Shen Yuan was a little fruitless. He had such weak muscles in his body, he never made it farther than pinning Liu Qingge for less than a second. All the holds and traps he taught him never amounted to anything.

They rolled and tousled across the canvas like boys. One moment, Shen Yuan *barely* had the upper hand, and the next, Liu Qingge was subduing him. Their faces were flushed with effort from the skirmish. Grins painted the corners of their lips.

Ready to finally settle the score, Liu Qingge positioned himself on top of Shen Yuan. His hands pinned his wrists to the floor, legs bracketing his waist. His hair, loose and undone from the roughhousing, cascaded around Shen Yuan's head.

A whisper of a smile remained on Shen Yuan's face. His eyes were shining with mirth, cheeks pink. His lips, parted and red, seemed to beckon Liu Qingge closer. To make matters worse, his tongue darted out to moisten his lips. With his chest heaving from exertion and the shirt gathered around his waist, Liu Qingge couldn't resist.

Deep inside him, he knew he didn't want to do this again unless Shen Yuan willingly asked for it. He'd taken his fair share from the man already with varying results. Being without Shen Yuan was hard enough, but bearing to live a life where Shen Yuan resented him was worse.

Nevertheless, he leaned down.

Liu Qingge didn't even register the switch.

Shen Yuan, taking advantage of Liu Qingge's moment of weakness, looped his knees around the backs of Liu Qingge's thighs and reversed their positions. If he had anticipated it, if he

hadn't gotten lost in his desire, Liu Qingge easily could have stopped the movement. Shen Yuan was extraordinarily fragile, after all.

But Shen Yuan ultimately won. He sat on Liu Qingge's abdomen, securing his wrists to the mats below them. "Ha!" He scrunched his nose and stuck his pink tongue out at the loser.

Liu Qingge could only blink in surprise. If anyone else dared to challenge him to a fight and had the actual audacity to win, they would have felt Liu Qingge's wrath for the rest of their lives. He couldn't *stand* losing. But Shen Yuan's smile did silly little things to his head and Shen Yuan's ass just one shift away from his dick did silly little things to his heart.

He couldn't have moved even if he tried.

"Shen Yuan—"

"Do you surrender, Liu Qingge?" He lilted. From this angle, Liu Qingge had a fantastic view of the long tendons in Shen Yuan's throat that connected to his collarbones, his shoulders.

He surrendered to this man a *looong* time ago. Liu Qingge nodded. If he opened his mouth to speak, he would say something stupid he would come to regret later.

Shen Yuan must've given up waiting for him to admit defeat. He slid off Liu Qingge's torso and he instantly missed the comforting weight of his body on him. Shen Yuan wasn't heavy to begin with, but Liu Qingge found himself gasping for air.

Untalented as he was, that little sneak had a whole plethora of greasy tricks up his sleeve.

He accepted Shen Yuan's outstretched hand to haul him back to his feet. His palm was warm and dry, the skin smooth. It wasn't littered with callouses like Liu Qingge's rough hands were; Shen Yuan was delicate and soft everywhere on his body.

Shen Yuan glanced at the time on his phone. "You have a little bit of time before the weigh in. Are you going to run off some more calories?"

It was a smart idea. Liu Qingge was close to the ideal weight, but shedding a few extra ounces wouldn't hurt. He nodded.

"I'm all sweaty and gross now, so I'm going to go back to the hotel and shower." He turned to leave.

"There are showers here," Liu Qingge said.

Shen Yuan lurched to a stop, scratching the back of his head. "Um, uh, I don't want to shower with…" his gaze darted rapidly around the room "…with all these other men around."

Images flared in Liu Qingge's vision of a pale, naked Shen Yuan surrounded by beefy men attempting to take advantage of him. Flirting with him. Making him blush. The water running down his body and pooling at his feet. The trail of creamy white soap sluicing down his thighs.

He saw red. His hands clenched into fists so tight, his own fingernails pierced the skin. Only Liu Qingge could see Shen Yuan like that. Only *he* could make him blush. He hmphed.

Shen Yuan shot him a funny look but left the gym.

It wasn't long before Liu Qingge was running laps around the building, shoes slapping the pavement with each stride. No matter how thick the sweat poured between his shoulder blades or how hard he pumped his arms, he couldn't stop thinking about Shen Yuan back at the hotel, probably ruffling his hair with a towel, fumbling for his glasses on the counter.

He'd be settling his basketball shorts on his hips, stray droplets of water curving around his bare chest and slipping below the waistband.

Fuck.

As if sensing his inappropriate thoughts, Shen Yuan materialized just outside the building, fanning himself in the shade. He was smiling gently, making Liu Qingge feel all the worse for violating him in his mind.

He ran faster.

Liu Qingge wore a track around the building until Shen Yuan stepped into his path, gesturing at the time.

Stopping would mean having to face Shen Yuan, freshly-showered, probably smelling of wildflowers and mint or some shit. But stopping *also* meant getting to pummel an opponent into pulp with his fists. *That* he could manage.

The weigh in was uneventful, his opponent making a mockery of himself by flexing his muscles in an embarrassing attempt to intimidate. From the corner of his eyes, Liu Qingge saw Shen Yuan shake in terror, but he felt on top of the world. This guy was *nothing*. He'd be mincemeat in a few minutes.

At the edge of the ring, Shen Yuan latched onto Liu Qingge's wrist. The touch sent sparks all along his body.

"…Be careful," he muttered. He looked bashfully to the ground, eyelashes trembling. "Don't get hurt."

What this man wouldn't give to swoop down and show everyone who Shen Yuan belonged to. "I won't," he said instead.

With those words, Liu Qingge stepped between the ropes. He raised his fists. The buzzer rang.

His opponent—whose name he never bothered to learn—danced towards him, coming on the offensive. Liu Qingge himself wasn't one for defense, but he'd take it slow at the beginning and strike when an opportunity arose.

An opportunity didn't arise for a while. The man's punches and kicks were concise, occasionally clipping Liu Qingge's shoulder or ribs. Those blows were more a blow to his ego than causing him any pain.

He envisioned a demon in his opponent's place. Luo Binghe, maybe. The brat he lost to for five consecutive years. But this time he wouldn't lose. Not when Shen Yuan was calling his name from the sidelines. He didn't dare to look.

Liu Qingge tackled the man, pinning him to the ground with the very armbar he'd trapped Shen Yuan in earlier that day. That, with one precise swing to the man's solar plexus, gave him the first round.

He went back to his corner to be greeted by Shen Yuan's wide grin, rounded cheeks red with delight. "You were awesome!" He cried, beckoning Liu Qingge down. When in front of him, Shen Yuan reached up to pinch and massage his shoulders.

The man was practically bouncing like a rabbit. Liu Qingge slipped the mouthguard from his teeth. "Got any advice, coach?" A smirk tilted his lips, his voice raspy from exertion.

Shen Yuan swallowed, the rise and fall of his Adam's apple not lost on Liu Qingge. "Uh, um, keep doing what you're doing?" He retracted his hands, regrettably.

"Got it, boss."

The break time was up, the sound round commenced.

Liu Qingge was ruthlessly efficient this time. He wasted no time skirting around the blows, just took what he could and returned them tenfold. It wasn't long before his opponent hit the mat once more.

Victory, victory, victory. The sweat from his forehead that found its way into his mouth is what victory tasted like. The weird chewy plastic in his mouth was victory. The tightness of his calves was victory.

Only after a few seconds passed did Liu Qingge register the roar of the crowd. His arm was raised to the sky by the referee, stretching towards the heavens.

Was this not the heavens themselves? The glory of winning and the bright smile of his lover on the sidelines?

The second Liu Qingge's bare feet touched the main floor, Shen Yuan was leaping over him, screaming incoherent expletives and going on about the championship round he'd be fighting later on.

Liu Qingge had no doubt he'd make it to fight the champion later tonight. He knew from the start he was better than all these fools. In this, he was unmatched.

His arm wrapped tight around Shen Yuan's body, not caring about the sweat that was going to stain his shirt.

Shen Yuan squirmed out of his grip; cheeks even redder than before. “Let’s get you some water and a snack.” Then he tugged him to their waiting room. “There’s a free physiotherapist on site that can massage your muscles before the next fight. And they have free snacks in the lobby too—I’ll get you some—and there’s also—”

“Shen Yuan.”

The man stilled, glasses sliding down his arched nose.

“I don’t need any of that.”

“But you should—”

Liu Qingge’s chest felt oddly warm. No, it was burning hot. “Fine. Get me some water, get me some snacks, but just…” He coughed into his fist. “…come back.”

Shen Yuan nearly tripped over his own feet. “O-of course, you idiot, who else would I talk to besides you?” Then he left the room.

Liu Qingge tipped his head back to rest against the wall. Now that he wasn’t in a tiny room alone with Shen Yuan, his heart began to slow.

When Shen Yuan returned, they ate in silence until the time passed.

They had little to say. Liu Qingge’s mind was occupied with two things. One was the championship match ahead. His opponent, Zhang Xiaowen, was new to the MMA scene, but had dominated his matches since the start. Liu Qingge wasn’t nervous, per say, just more eager to finish the competition so he could go back home. Being around all of the people snapping his photo and asking for interviews was exhausting.

The second thing on his mind, naturally, was Shen Yuan. He was borderline obsessive towards him. No twitch of his fingers, no time he opened his mouth to take in another bite of food, no time he pushed his glasses further up his sloped nose went unnoticed.

He could stare at him uninterrupted for hours. Nothing else was worth looking away for.

“It’s time,” Shen Yuan finally said.

They made their way back to the arena, packed full of people waiting to watch the championship match. Zhang Xiaowen was already there, talking to his coach. He spared a glance at Liu Qingge but didn’t linger.

Good. They weren’t friends.

Shen Yuan’s leg bounced while Liu Qingge wrapped his knuckles. The action was familiar and soothing, looping round and round until it was tight and hard. He did some light stretches to get warmth back into his body.

“Liu Qingge.” Shen Yuan said.

He looked at him.

“I just wanted to say—”

“*Would the contestants please come to the stage!”* The announcer boomed over the microphone. The words ricocheted off the walls.

Secretly, Liu Qingge was itching to hear any words from Shen Yuan’s mouth, but duty called. *Later* , he wanted to say, but didn’t. He cast one last glance at Shen Yuan before stepping up to the mat in the center of the room. *I’ll win for you*.

Zhang Xiaowen was built like an ox, muscles more prominent than Liu Qingge’s, and taller, too. His hair was tied in a short ponytail at the back of his head, eyes blazing with determination.

Anyone else would be intimidated, but Liu Qingge wasn’t just anyone. He was the Bai Zhan War God. He ate guys like this for breakfast.

The announcer gave his introductory speech, much too long for Liu Qingge’s liking. Zhang Xiaowen seemed to feel the same. All that Liu Qingge wanted to do was *fight*. He wanted to *win*. He wanted Shen Yuan to watch him excel at what he did best.

The referee blew his whistle, and the championship match began.

The first round was often the hardest. Both fighters were full of energy, but also had to scope out the other’s weaknesses in the span of a few seconds, one minute at most.

Zhang Xiaowen was light on his feet, precise. His stance was excellent. No wonder he had made it this far.

But he was up against Liu Qingge, the rising star that nobody heard about who didn’t even have a real coach. The rising star who trampled everyone in his path. And Zhang Xiaowen was just going to be another victim.

With that, Liu Qingge lunged forward. He dodged a well-swung fist aiming for his head and countered with his own. It barely missed.

Missed. Liu Qingge didn’t miss.

Seething with rage, he grew ruthless, landing blow after blow. But every hit he completed brought its own assault from Zhang Xiaowen. It would be hard to tell who had acquired more points by the end of the round.

This continued with little evasive maneuvers on either side until the bell rang tinny in Liu Qingge’s ears.

He drew back instantly, chest heaving with sweat.

This guy…may actually prove to be a real challenge.

Liu Qingge joined Shen Yuan back on the floor.

“It’s really stressful to watch you take so many hits.” Shen Yuan said, biting his nails.

Ouch. That hurt more.

“I don’t want to see you get injured…”

His shoulders relaxed at Shen Yuan’s reasoning. At least he didn’t think he was pathetic for taking a hit every now and then.

“Just make sure you’re careful.” He passed Liu Qingge a bottle of water. The brush of their fingers when the bottle was passed was enough to send sparks through Liu Qingge’s whole body.

Liu Qingge considered grumbling that careful didn’t win battles, but he accepted the water and took a swig instead. Bickering with Shen Yuan would only cause him more stress and anxiety.

Shen Yuan shook his head and took a deep breath. “Okay.” He slapped his palms to Liu Qingge’s pecs. “Time to get back out there, soldier.”

What could Liu Qingge even say? Shen Yuan’s hands were cupping his chest. “Your—”

Shen Yuan’s face warmed to an alarming shade of red. “*Oh my god.* ” He withdrew.

Liu Qingge wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. But he didn’t have time to decide because he was getting called back to the ring.

The mouthguard went back in, and he shook out his limbs. This was easy. Fighting was simple. Punch, dodge, kick. That’s all it was. He’d blaze through these next two rounds and finally be able to focus solely on Shen Yuan.

His and Zhang Xiaowen’s eyes met across the canvas. Neither would yield, but one eventually had to, and it wouldn’t be Liu Qingge.

Exhilaration coursed through Liu Qingge’s veins as the referee brought his hand down and the second round began.

The first few seconds passed as they normally did, Zhang Xiaowen and Liu Qingge gauging the other, waiting for the perfect opportunity. When it came, they began to exchange strikes.

Liu Qingge’s carefully-placed arms lowered. From the corner of his eyes, he spotted Shen Yuan, not watching, as he should be, but conversing with someone else, another coach.

What’s that about?

A punch to the ribs brought him back to the match. Ah, right. He was fighting someone right now. He swung his leg, landing a kick to cause Zhang Xiaowen to stumble. Liu Qingge dared to glance in Shen Yuan’s direction.

Now his phone was out. He and the other man—tall, muscular—continued to chat, gesturing at the phones in their hands. Shen Yuan nodded. He smiled.

Liu Qingge crashed to the ground first. The pain in his cheek registered second. He lay on the mat in disbelief. The great War God… struck down?

He considered, for the briefest moment, losing the round to interrogate Shen Yuan and his new *male friend* (knock some sense into the latter), but realized it would probably be quicker to just obliterate this loser. Then he could address the *real* problem.

Liu Qingge leapt from the ground and attacked. The muscles in his arms flexed and stretched with each rapid strike.

His offense played off. The buzzer rang, sparing him from the second round. He drew back before the referee could even announce a short break and skulked to the corner.

The disgusting man waved goodbye to Shen Yuan just before Liu Qingge could do anything about him.

"You did a g—"

"Was he bothering you?" Liu Qingge tongued his cheek, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Shen Yuan looked as if Liu Qingge had just offered to slaughter everyone in the whole arena for his hand. And, honestly, he would. "What? No, he was—why does it matter anyway?"

So they *were* flirting. Liu Qingge couldn't wait for the next round to start. He needed to expel the tsunami of energy that was pulsing through him from the top of his scalp to the tips of his fingers. "You weren't watching the match."

"I looked away for *two seconds*; what's gotten into you?"

Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan had gotten into him. He grit his teeth.

Shen Yuan heaved a sigh. "Listen."

He was.

"I don't know what you think you saw. But I wasn't doing…anything. In fact, I—" He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Those shimmering brown eyes dropped to the ground. His fingers twisted between each other. "…I don't look at anyone besides you."

A fire roared in his chest. This wasn't his usual fire of fury, but a fire of desire and lust.

Everything else was forgotten. Those words were enough to make him tremble. Not with anxiety, but with an appetite and urge so consuming he could hardly swallow it down. He would vomit. He would punch a wall. He would crush Shen Yuan's body to his.

The feeling was as if a wall of qi came crashing onto him. He was so full of power. Everything was possible.

“Later,” he said in a moment of passion, gripping Shen Yuan’s biceps in his tape-wrapped hands. “Later we’ll talk.”

Shen Yuan must have understood the weight of the word *talk* . He swallowed, cheeks glowing. Then nodded, eyebrows bunching together. He parted his pink lips to speak. “Fine, fine.” It was a scratchy whisper. The phrase was something so delicate and hopeful.

Then he had to return. The referee summoned him to the canvas.

Liu Qingge, roaring with energy, felt indestructible. A wicked grin nearly split his face in two. His whole body tensed in preparation.

The second the bell clanged, Liu Qingge was on the offensive. He didn’t feel anything Zhang Xiaowen did. If his opponent was hitting him, it never registered.

Liu Qingge only knew the flying of his own fists, cycling in such rapid progression they were a blur before his own eyes.

Zhang Xiaowen was talented, Liu Qingge would give him that, but not many people could withstand such an onslaught from the Bai Zhan War God. *Especially* not a mortal.

And just like that, Zhang Xiaowen tumbled to the ground. He tried, valiantly, to raise his sweaty forehead from the mat as Liu Qingge paced around him, but it was too late.

A knockout.

Liu Qingge didn’t hear a thing. All he saw when he whipped his head around to the floor was Shen Yuan. *His* Shen Yuan, bouncing and screaming and matching Liu Qingge’s smile so wide he could count every tooth if he wanted. Seeing his reaction made everything worth it. No trophy or medal or award or weirdly-huge belt could compare to the fizzy feeling Liu Qingge got when he saw Shen Yuan’s smile.

The referee lifted his arm to the ceiling. A shiny golden trophy and the aforementioned belt was hefted into his hands.

Then flashes of cameras. More screams. Time passing in a blur.

But the radiance of Shen Yuan never faltered.

Until the crowd finally parted and all that remained was Shen Yuan.

Liu Qingge’s chest ached. Fuck this trophy and this belt. He wanted nothing more than to dump them on the ground and replace the emptiness of his arms with Shen Yuan instead.

He almost did, but Shen Yuan interrupted him. “Ready to go? I packed up most of your things.”

The exhaustion hit him like a swinging hammer. It was late; he was eager to get back to the hotel and relax. Get away from all the people. Be alone with Shen Yuan.

But that would mean… *"Later. Let's talk later."*

Fuck.

Now he actually had to face the consequences of saying something so rash in the heat of the moment. Now he would have to lay his cards on the table and wait for Shen Yuan to make his move.

After all this, he nodded. Going would be wise.

The trip across the parking lot to the hotel was short. The two had nothing to say to each other, both weighed down with their own interpretations of how things have gone, how things may go.

Liu Qingge leapt between optimism and pessimism. When one hopeful thought came, it was instantly squashed with the opposite.

Once they arrived back to their room, *the Honeymoon Suite*, Shen Yuan dumped Liu Qingge's duffel bag to the chair and shed his shoes. "*God*, I'm so tired."

Liu Qingge was too. But not *that* tired that his mind didn't instantly think of all the ways he could corrupt Shen Yuan alone in their hotel room *right now* . He would lift Shen Yuan's shirt over his head and push his shorts down before backing him into the bed. He would run his palms over every inch of Shen Yuan's bare skin until it grew hot underneath him. He would —

"You should take a shower."

He should take a shower.

He resecured his hair into a bun. He would wash his hair tomorrow morning. Now, that just sounded like too much of a hassle. A few minutes later, Liu Qingge found himself standing under an ice-cold stream and disassociating. Was he tired? Was he horny? Was he both?

Liu Qingge wasn't one to just let things go. The idea of waiting to see what Shen Yuan would do pained him. But how could he not wait? If Shen Yuan gave him slivers of affection once every ten years, Liu Qingge would be there to receive them.

The pounding of the water on his shoulders dulled his thoughts. It felt better, not thinking.

He didn't know how much time had passed when he finally left the shower, chilled to the bone. He wrapped the towel low around his hips and opened the bathroom door.

Shen Yuan wasn't in the main area, on the bed or at the table. His clothes and shoes lay scattered across the room with no rhyme or reason. The sight was endearing. It was classic Shen Yuan. He'd gotten better in cleaning the longer they had lived together, but occasionally these little spurts of habit would return.

He poked his head around the wall, spotting a silhouette in the hot tub. Shen Yuan sat there like a gentle king, framed by stars.

Now was his time.

He joined him on the balcony. Shen Yuan startled, just a bit, when he saw Liu Qingge standing there in nothing but a short towel. His eyes danced over Liu Qingge's form for a nanosecond.

The water rippled when Liu Qingge stepped in, surprised by the warmth of the tub. It was slightly hotter than most hot springs he had visited. And here, isolated on a little balcony with no natural way to keep it heated. How interesting. He left the towel on the steps and caught Shen Yuan's eyes lingering on the bones of his hips.

Shen Yuan frowned and looked away.

They were silent until the water stilled around them. Even after that, the space was filled with the sounds of night.

But then, a shift. A shaky breath from his hot spring partner.

Shen Yuan tongued his cheek. "Why did you… stop kissing me yesterday?" His tone was hard to read.

He had wanted to avoid this conversation. Even though he so desperately craved to have *clarity* for once, the topic of the conversation pained him.

He foolishly hoped that him getting up to leave last night would be enough reason and that Shen Yuan wouldn't question it. But as he had walked to the bathroom, his heart stuttered violently in his chest as he recalled the way Shen Yuan's shaking hands had pressed into Liu Qingge's spine, that electrifying jolt that went straight to his dick when Shen Yuan slid his hands up to dig into his lower back. It had awoken something feral in him. If Shen Yuan had continued to touch him in that way, he would've humped the mattress to relieve himself like an inexperienced child.

For maybe the first time in his life, he thought before speaking. He chose his words carefully. "I didn't want to hurt you again." His voice was a whisper.

Shen Yuan appeared as awkward as Liu Qingge felt. He shifted against the bench, not meeting his eyes. "You leaving without a word hurt me more."

Liu Qingge wasn't good at this kind of thing. Unchecked, he was a danger to Shen Yuan; his impulses, no matter the level of restraint, were not easily ignored.

After the first kiss he forced on Shen Yuan, everything changed. Once he had one taste, he wanted nothing more than to continue to know Shen Yuan's body intimately. And when Shen Yuan pushed him to the chain link fence and kissed him on the basketball court, Liu Qingge thought everything had finally worked out.

Until he royally fucked up and ruined everything in his typical fashion.

Since then, since last *night*, it almost was as if they were back to square one. Liu Qingge kept giving in and making stupid mistakes.

After greedily indulging in the warm cavern of Shen Yuan's mouth, he had pulled away full of cold regret.

As much as he hungered for it, he didn't *want* to just take and take. There was nothing satisfying about taking but not knowing if the other person was into it or not. He needed proof that Shen Yuan was reciprocating Liu Qingge's…feelings. If he dared to call them that.

So he had made his decision. "I won't," god, how did he say this? Words were never easy for him. "I won't do anything if you don't want it." It was cryptic. A shoddy explanation.

Shen Yuan's eyebrow raised. He was skeptical, Liu Qingge could tell, but he didn't say anything in response. He turned to face the horizon in silence. The stars glittered behind him, the sound of waves crashed along the shore.

Liu Qingge won today. He didn't feel like a winner. A fat, golden trophy in his hands was one thing, but it dulled in comparison to what he really yearned for.

Liu Qingge had lost his chances, that much was clear. All he had now were those fond memories of the rare moments he could hold Shen Yuan in his arms. He tipped his head back against the ledge and closed his eyes.

The water of the tub rippled slightly, then more. He heard the slosh of it and opened his eyes. Shen Yuan stood before him, beads of water sluicing down his body. He was beautiful with his delicate, pale skin, rosy, pink nipples, the star-shaped scar in the center of his chest, the soft, rounded skin under his belly button. "And what if I want it?" He whispered, fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides.

Liu Qingge couldn't breathe.

Shen Yuan's eyes, unblocked by his glasses, stared directly into Liu Qingge's. He was terrified. But Liu Qingge was so proud of his bravery. In front of him stood the strongest man in the world.

Under the water, Shen Yuan's knee skimmed against the outside of Liu Qingge's thigh. Liu Qingge couldn't contain his gasp, and even less so when Shen Yuan straddled and sat on Liu Qingge's bare legs. His cock twitched in interest.

He could feel him. Oh, *god*, he could feel him.

This was the sign he had wanted. What he had been looking for. Direct words that he could understand, not some cryptic body language or lingering touches that could have meant something but Liu Qingge was never brave enough to ask.

But what if– what if he–

"Liu- gege," Shen Yuan's fingertips toyed with the ends of Liu Qingge's ponytail. His voice still shook, but the words were more arousing than any kind of porn Liu Qingge had ever tried to read. "Won't you touch me?"

Liu Qingge wanted to take him in this hot spring right now. He could fuck him so hard the water sloshed over the edges and splattered onto the balcony. He nearly let the lust cloud his vision, but he couldn't, couldn't, couldn't. He had to do it differently for Shen Yuan. Instead, he brought his hands to Shen Yuan's waist. It fit so perfectly under his palms, the skin so soft and tender.

Shen Yuan leaned forward to slowly untie the binding at the top of Liu Qingge's head. The tension that had built along his skull released, sending tingles to the back of his neck. Shen Yuan's fingernails gently scraped along his scalp, loosening the braids so it cascaded down Liu Qingge's back.

He could've fallen asleep to the feeling. Whatever Shen Yuan was doing with his hair made him feel like he was floating.

But Shen Yuan's neck was so close. He inched forward and pressed his mouth to the raised cord on his throat and bit back a moan. God, he felt amazing. He dared to dart out his tongue and lick a stripe. He *tasted* amazing, too.

Shen Yuan shuddered beneath his palms, breath hitching. His fingers didn't cease the untangling of his strands or the soft tugs on his roots, just continuing to elicit sighs that Liu Qingge couldn't control.

What Liu Qingge wouldn't give to yank Shen Yuan flush against his body. What he wouldn't give to bite and kiss and push his hands so deeply into Shen Yuan's skin that he was forever marked by him. So that every time he looked in the mirror he would see Liu Qingge there with him. But there was something so perfect about just holding and just being held.

With calloused, imperfect hands, Liu Qingge rubbed along Shen Yuan's spine and risked it all to bring him closer, just a tiny bit.

The water was cold compared to the burning of Shen Yuan's bare skin against him.

He couldn't wait any longer. Liu Qingge kissed Shen Yuan's jaw, then finally did as he wanted to for so long. He at last kissed Shen Yuan's parted lips.

The kiss was ascending to the heavens. It was the victory against evil. It was the satisfying slice of Cheng Luan against a Demon's throat.

It was Shen Yuan.

They were slow, languid. Each touch was intentional and light, like they were both afraid to burst the careful bubble they had cultivated together.

Liu Qingge was perfectly content. His lust hadn't faded, only grew, but their lethargic, open-mouthed kisses were impossible to break from. If he pulled away, would all this end?

Shen Yuan wasn't satiated. He hummed against Liu Qingge's tongue and rocked his hips forward.

That was that. Liu Qingge stood from the water, taking Shen Yuan with him, pressing their chests together. Shen Yuan peered up at him with kiss-drunk eyes, knuckles still tangled in his hair.

What a sight. Liu Qingge soaked in this moment. His own hand came up to brush the damp bangs from Shen Yuan's forehead. The man in his arms shivered but leaned into the touch. He inhaled a shaky breath, nuzzling against the thumb that caressed his cheekbone.

Liu Qingge suddenly felt out of sorts, unsure.

Shen Yuan sensed this, tilting his head. "Everything okay?" He ran his digits through the strands of Liu Qingge's hair again and again and again. He shifted his hips until *they* brushed together, and Liu Qingge gasped.

Shen Yuan smirked, the little brat.

That re-stoked the fire of confidence in Liu Qingge. He half-lovingly guided and half-manhandled Shen Yuan into the suite, dripping hot tub water onto the floor in a slippery path. That didn't matter, though, because Liu Qingge sought Shen Yuan's warm lips again. The water made their bodies slick, providing an interesting awareness to each slide that made Liu Qingge itch.

He pushed Shen Yuan to the mattress, looking down at his flushed body.

Shen Yuan was still for a moment, mind still clouded with desire before realizing the nakedness of his own self. He closed his thighs too prettily, fingers reaching to grab a sheet.

"No," the word left Liu Qingge's mouth, almost desperately, before he even recognized he was speaking, "I want to see you. You look beautiful."

A few months ago, Liu Qingge would have vomited if heard himself call anyone beautiful. Those words of affection were nonsense, ignorance, weakness.

And yes, now he *was* made weak. Shen Yuan ruined every fiber of Liu Qingge's being. He made him into a cowardly wimp, dependent on him.

Shen Yuan rolled his lips together, but complied, a charming blush colouring his cheeks. "Are you just going to leave me here?" he grumbled, shyly.

Liu Qingge couldn't allow that to happen.

He brought his hands over Shen Yuan's torso, tracing every inch of his skin. Shen Yuan squirmed at the attention, but Liu Qingge paid him no mind. For now, he was just dedicating the shapes, the curves, the softness of skin to memory. He purposefully ignored touching Shen Yuan's twitching cock, much to the man's dismay. The time would come, but he first wanted to familiarize himself with the way Shen Yuan sighed his name when he pressed his thumb against his nipple, when he squeezed his hip bone.

A kind of desperation and selfishness possessed him. No one else could see this. Shen Yuan was his and his alone.

Finally, Shen Yuan caved. “ *Please* kiss me, Liu-gege .”

The term of affection was a lethal blow to Liu Qingge’s restraint.

In retaliation, he wrapped a tight fist around Shen Yuan’s dick, stroking only once. Shen Yuan keened, back arching. He raised his hands to pull Liu Qingge down on top of him as he leisurely fondled his hard length. They kissed, Shen Yuan’s silky tongue performing some kind of magic trick that left Liu Qingge seeing stars.

He himself was painfully hard, but watching Shen Yuan rut his hips into Liu Qingge’s hand to seek his own relief was just as satisfying.

Shen Yuan gripped Liu Qingge’s shoulders, whining incoherently. “I’m gonna—please—d-don’t stop—I—!”

Liu Qingge’s thumb ran over the slit on the head of Shen Yuan’s cock, smearing pre-cum along it. That combined with a twist of his wrist sent Shen Yuan over the edge.

He was art. If Shen Yuan rolled over and fell fast asleep, Liu Qingge would be completely satisfied having watched this scene play out before him. He’d seen Shen Yuan climax before, in a flurry of recklessness, but this was more intentional. Shen Yuan moaned shakily in Liu Qingge’s ear, body quivering beneath him. Hot come spurt over his torso and continued to dribble from the head as Liu Qingge caressed him to oversensitivity. When he was finished, his eyes were glazed over with pleasure, chest heaving.

Liu Qingge stared, breathless. It hit him that this was *real* and *actually happening*. To prove it to himself, he swiped a finger down Shen Yuan’s abdomen to collect some of his spend. He brought the digit to his own lips, swirling his tongue to catch a taste.

Maybe it was the lust speaking, maybe it wasn’t, but it was the best meal Liu Qingge ever had. He pressed another heady kiss to Shen Yuan’s lips.

Shen Yuan’s fingers attempted to grip Liu Qingge’s own cock but he pushed his hand away.

“B-but,” he babbled, “you haven’t—”

Liu Qingge pecked his cheek. “I will.”

This kind of tenderness was something Liu Qingge never thought himself capable of. Every cell in his body was charged with urges to conquer and take. But Shen Yuan rewrote him into someone new.

He gathered more of the release that remained on Shen Yuan’s stomach and brought it down between his legs. “Do you trust me?” Liu Qingge asked. He massaged his velvety taint and elicited a choked groan.

“Yes, yes, yes, just do it already!” Shen Yuan twisted his body to get away from or lean into the feeling, Liu Qingge wasn’t sure.

But that was the permission he needed.

Liu Qingge found that tight, puckered hole with his middle finger and circled it, gauging Shen Yuan's reaction. He seemed fine, gripping Liu Qingge's biceps and rolling his hips. Liu Qingge breached that forbidden entrance to the first knuckle, and Shen Yuan jolted upwards, trying to slam his legs together.

Oh shit, oh shit, he didn't want this. Shen Yuan was going to call it here and now Liu Qingge went too far and broke his trust all over again. He went to retract his finger, but Shen Yuan latched onto his wrist.

"Don't you *dare*," he choked out, a lone tear clinging onto his eyelashes.

Something snapped in Liu Qingge. Shen Yuan was going to let him fuck him. He growled, shoving Shen Yuan back to the mattress before pushing his finger deeper inside. The channel was incredibly tight and fiery hot.

Shen Yuan writhed underneath him.

Liu Qingge bent and stretched his finger inside, feeling Shen Yuan loosen and relax. "You're doing such a good job," he said. His voice didn't even sound like himself with how hoarse it was. His free hand greedily groped Shen Yuan's body before he swiftly pushed another finger inside.

Shen Yuan gasped, but instantly melted when Liu Qingge found the special place inside him. He curled and scissored his fingers, abusing that spot, mercilessly, until Shen Yuan bucked his hips and cried out. "L-Liu-gege ! Please, just—just, I'm ready I'm ready I'm ready I'm ready I'm ready—!"

He was all talk, though, because when Liu Qingge slid his fingers out from him, Shen Yuan fussed and squirmed anew.

"I want, I want to touch you," he panted. His hands reached forward, combing through Liu Qingge's draping hair until he eventually cupped his cheeks.

Liu Qingge's face burned despite having just fingered Shen Yuan's ass. An interesting contrast. Defiling Shen Yuan with his hand warmed his body, yes, but Shen Yuan's teary gaze flitting over the features of his face is what made him harder and more embarrassed.

"I'm—I'm so proud of you," Shen Yuan sputtered. His body quaked with shivers.

Fuck. Liu Qingge nudged Shen Yuan's knees further apart, bending them to get better access. He pumped his rock-hard cock once, coating it in precum. He lined himself up. "Whatever for?"

Shen Yuan grew bolder, frantically running his fingers along Liu Qingge's body. Every inch he covered left Liu Qingge increasingly desperate for him. If he didn't stick his dick in Shen Yuan *now* he would actually shatter like a broken mirror.

He pressed his tip right to Shen Yuan's fluttering hole, waiting. "*Whatever for*?" He repeated.

It was his turn to blush. “Forget I said anything! Screw this! Screw you!” He thrashed and attempted to scuttle away as if to hide from the words that lingered in the air, but Liu Qingge’s grip on his waist was punishing.

Fine, then. If this was the game Shen Yuan wanted to play. Liu Qingge pushed his hips forward and, with some resistance, breached Shen Yuan’s entrance.

The tightness around Liu Qingge’s sensitive tip sucked the breath from his lungs. It felt impossible to gather himself while Shen Yuan clenched and twisted his body at the intrusion. If he kept this up, Liu Qingge wasn’t going to last another five seconds. “Stay…still,” he growled through gritted teeth.

Shen Yuan stiffened. He didn’t dare move any more, just huffed rapidly through his nose.

Liu Qingge didn’t want to see Shen Yuan in pain. As good as it felt, watching another tear squeeze out the corner of Shen Yuan’s eye pained him just the same. He wasn’t ready. Liu Qingge leaned backwards.

He didn’t get very far because Shen Yuan seized Liu Qingge’s wrist. Desperation painted his irises. “Don’t even *think* about stopping.”

Who was Liu Qingge to deny him?

He swept down to claim Shen Yuan’s lips in a flurry of deep, passionate kisses. While their tongues slid against the others’, Liu Qingge stroked Shen Yuan’s belly and slid farther inside. With each minuscule centimeter, Shen Yuan’s whines were swallowed by Liu Qingge’s mouth.

It felt *good.* Unbelievably so. *Good* was such a weak descriptor for all the things Liu Qingge was feeling. He was never great at identifying his feelings, but he knew that now his dick had a taste of Shen Yuan’s opening, nothing else would ever compare. Gone were the days of fucking his own fist, Liu Qingge couldn’t wait to paint Shen Yuan with his cum. He couldn’t wait to fuck Shen Yuan silly until all he knew was the shape of Liu Qingge’s cock.

These filthy thoughts continued until his bare hips sat flush against Shen Yuan’s ass.

He needed a *minute*. As hard as it was, Liu Qingge scraped together the concentration to tear himself away from Shen Yuan’s soft mouth and duck his head into his shoulder.

They heaved a few breaths together, adjusting.

Until Liu Qingge couldn’t be patient any longer. He gave an experimental roll of his hips, groaning at the compression around him. Shen Yuan’s breath caught in his chest at the action. He found solace in Liu Qingge’s dark hair that drew around their faces like a curtain, protecting them from the outside world.

“You feel *incredible*.” Liu Qingge gathered the strength to kiss the corner of Shen Yuan’s open mouth.

“Why,” Shen Yuan met Liu Qingge’s gaze. His pupils were blown wide with desire. “Are you so *fucking big*?!”

Liu Qingge didn’t bother attempting to bite back his grin. He rewarded Shen Yuan’s candor with another thrust, and watched him throw his head back, exposing the pale column of his throat. Liu Qingge quickly took advantage, taking the time to taste his skin. He continued to rock gently into Shen Yuan while he nibbled and sucked at his neck.

Arousal clouded his vision. The room felt oppressive with heat, and his body felt the same, only egged on by Shen Yuan’s mewls in his ear, the lethargic tugs at the roots of his hair and, of course, the warm, soft orifice his cock was sheathed inside.

Heaven. Pure heaven.

He felt his heart might explode. “I can’t believe you’re mine.” He punctuated his statement by leaning back and gripping Shen Yuan’s narrow hips to push himself deeper inside.

Shen Yuan groaned in a mix of pleasure and embarrassment. Liu Qingge felt the loss of Shen Yuan’s burning palms on his shoulders as he brought them to cover his own thin face. “You can’t just say stuff like that…”

“No,” Liu Qingge gasped, “stop hiding.” He propped himself up with one shaking arm and with the other, batted Shen Yuan’s hands away from his face.

He was so beautiful. In the throes of passion and lust, tears clung to his eyelashes and his cheeks grew brighter in colour with each thrust.

Every time Liu Qingge found that special spot with his dick, Shen Yuan shuddered beneath him. After only a few slow, yet deep, pushes, he managed to obtain a pretty consistent success rate. And seeing Shen Yuan’s thighs shake every time only made his cock harder.

He sat on his haunches, pulling Shen Yuan’s hips to rest on his thighs. Like this, Shen Yuan’s spine arched off the bed in a graceful curve, only connected to it by his upper back and shoulders. Liu Qingge had a fine hold on Shen Yuan’s plump ass, and he took extra care kneading the cheeks with his fingertips until Shen Yuan squirmed around his cock.

It was fascinating to see them connected so closely. He trailed his hand up Shen Yuan’s hip and to his belly, avoiding his own throbbing dick. He pressed down against his stomach, feeling his Shen Yuan clench around him in a vice grip.

Shen Yuan had listened well before and didn’t dare to cover his face again, but humiliation coloured his cheeks as he looked to the side. “J-just fuck me already.”

Liu Qingge didn’t need to be told twice.

He started slow, watching Shen Yuan’s fluttering expressions, but grew in confidence and strength with each encouraging moan from Shen Yuan’s lips.

Then he began to fuck him in earnest, mind only thinking *Shen Yuan* again and again and again. He elicited choked gasps from the man beneath him, and while he was taking Liu

Qingge's cock *so* well, his eyes were wet with alluring tears.

Blood rushed to his groin; it wouldn't be long now.

"S-say my name—" SY babbled, fingernails clawing at Liu Qingge's forearms. "—please, please Liu-gege ."

Liu Qingge settled back over top of him, noting Shen Yuan's slight wince at the change of angle. He still masterfully targeted Shen Yuan's sweet spot. He knew why Shen Yuan wanted his name on Liu Qingge's lips. It was to make up for *last time*. It was the least Liu Qingge could do.

He wrapped a fist around Shen Yuan's hot, pulsing length, slick with pre-come, and pumped it a few times.

"Shen Yuan," Liu Qingge ground out, mercilessly twisting his wrist, and thrusting in tandem. "Are you going to come for me?"

That was all the man needed.

Thick ropes of hot come coated Liu Qingge's hand and Shen Yuan's stomach as he cried out so wantonly and openly that Liu Qingge came only a few pushes after.

He settled himself deep inside, releasing his seed into Shen Yuan's warm, tight channel that continued to seize around him. A moan fell from his own lips and spots danced in his vision. That hole pulsed and squeezed and milked him completely dry. His body was made weak and frail in a way he'd never known.

Once he came down from arguably the best orgasm in his entire life, he gauged Shen Yuan's reactions.

His chest heaved while his legs continued to shake. Shen Yuan's bangs clung to his damp forehead and when he looked at Liu Qingge, his pupils were glazed over with pleasure.

Still sheathed inside, Liu Qingge's cock twitched.

He had just *defiled* Shen Yuan. Defiled him so beautifully that he continued to flutter around him and that small keens didn't stop escaping his bitten lips.

Liu Qingge had no words. He leaned down to kiss Shen Yuan, languidly swiping his tongue along the roof of Shen Yuan's mouth and the backs of his teeth. Every inch of him was *his*.

"You're still—" Shen Yuan mumbled, shaking his head away from Liu Qingge's onslaught, "you're still…inside…"

"Let me stay here."

"*God, fuck no!* " Shen Yuan attempted to scramble away, but his limbs shook, so he didn't make it very far.

Liu Qingge grinned at the sight; Shen Yuan made weak by his cock. He slid out with a wet squelch that made Shen Yuan cringe again. To him, maybe their sexual act was embarrassing, but to Liu Qingge, the sound was a reminder of his conquest.

As much as he hated it, he peeled himself off Shen Yuan's body, escaping to the bathroom to grab a damp cloth.

When he returned only a few moments later, Shen Yuan's eyes were closed, breath shallow. Liu Qingge flicked off the remaining lights, and after his eyes adjusted to the complete dark, he carefully wiped the spend from between Shen Yuan's thighs and along his torso. With a clean corner of the cloth, he dabbed at his forehead.

Shen Yuan's eyes fluttered open, but Liu Qingge wouldn't have it. He drew the blankets over Shen Yuan's naked body.

Maybe his heart was having trouble adjusting after the exercise, but it pounded erratically beneath his ribs. He couldn't believe it. He'd dreamed of this day for longer than he'd have liked to admit, but it had happened. He had watched Shen Yuan come apart beneath him and cry his name. He'd watched Shen Yuan reach his hands to search for Liu Qingge's body and press kisses to his skin.

Shen Yuan had willingly crawled into his arms and stayed there.

Who was this man, this MMA Champion who tucked his lover under the sheets? Who was he to smile affectionately while the man he had just fucked slept in their shared bed?

A shiver ran down his spine.

The Bai Zhan Peak War God was becoming soft. And Liu Qingge didn't hate it.

Chapter End Notes

two dudes, chilling in a hot tub, 5 feet apart cuz they're not gay

Chapter 24: Scars

Chapter Notes

J said this was their favourite chapter :') bless u J mwah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dating Liu Qingge didn't change many things.

Liu Qingge woke up, went to the gym, and came back. Evenings were spent lounging on the couch watching Shen Yuan's guilty pleasure movies and fighting films for Liu Qingge. They would pass popcorn and other snacks between their hands, still feeling that exciting tingling in their fingertips when they touched.

Sometimes they went outside, not as often as Liu Qingge would have liked, walking around the park and being too shy to hold hands. They would try a new restaurant and get iced coffee.

They would go back to that fateful basketball court and actually play basketball this time. Shen Yuan was still shit, but every now and then, with a stroke of luck, the ball would finally swish into the net.

Shen Yuan would watch the hem of Liu Qingge's basketball shorts ride up as he prepared to snatch the ball away, getting a hint of the flexing muscles of his thighs and imagining himself sitting on top of them.

On the other hand, dating Liu Qingge changed *everything*.

First of all, Shen Yuan got his fucking bed back.

And before he went to the gym, Liu Qingge would say his classic, curt goodbye, but only after kissing Shen Yuan until he was in a tizzy (which didn't take long). Those passionate kisses greeted him when he woke up and when Liu Qingge opened the door to return home. The first thing he would do was seek out Shen Yuan's body, grabbing it greedily between his hands and making quick work of getting Shen Yuan to be a moaning mess underneath him.

Then there were the meals. Ever since Shen Yuan had cut his finger with the knife so long ago, Liu Qingge rarely allowed him in the kitchen at all. Only if he wanted to lift Shen Yuan onto the counter and ravish him there, food long forgotten for a completely different meal.

Which happened more than a few times.

But the times that *didn't* happen, they'd sit beside each other at the cluttered dining room table, knees and thighs bumping together. Shen Yuan would laugh awkwardly, and Liu

Qingge's face would burn such a bright red, that along with the twitching of his under eye, made it seem he was at risk of exploding.

He was so confusing to decipher; one second Liu Qingge would be latching onto Shen Yuan and kissing him like he was a man dying of thirst and Shen Yuan was his oasis, and the next he'd turn a furious shade of pink if Shen Yuan made a teasing comment or their knuckles brushed together.

One tease could get Liu Qingge muttering " *shameless* " under his breath, but the same tease could also get Shen Yuan fucked against the wall.

Liu Qingge was a wildcard, and Shen Yuan refused to walk on eggshells to appease him or his own ass.

It wasn't constant, of course, Liu Qingge did have *some* restraint.

The nicest, albeit most embarrassing, part for Shen Yuan was those lazy mornings when he'd wake up in Liu Qingge's arms. They were always warm and strong, holding him close so their hearts beat together. Even if he was too warm from the blanket of Liu Qingge's hair spilling across him or the soft skin behind Liu Qingge's knees wrapped around his thigh, Shen Yuan never wanted to leave.

Of course, in the rare instances Shen Yuan was awake before Liu Qingge, trapped in his warm embrace, there was truly nothing he could do besides nuzzle his nose into Liu Qingge's chest and accept his fate. But the moment Liu Qingge woke up, Shen Yuan would do everything in his power to scramble away.

Cuddling—he shuddered—in sleep was one thing, but when both parties were awake it just became too embarrassing to bear. But that would only determine Liu Qingge to hold him tighter.

"Okay, okay, fine, just for a little bit, ease up, you're squeezing me to death," he would wheeze, and they would continue to listen to the sounds of their shared breaths, Shen Yuan's hand moving on its own to stroke the strands of Liu Qingge's hair.

For so much of his life, Shen Yuan was perfectly content with his internet friends, or lack thereof. Ranting about shit web novels and flooding forums with pessimistic takes had been his comfort and joy for years. In adulthood, he never felt he was lacking something.

But there was something so nauseating and addicting about companionship. Liu Qingge had wrestled his way into Shen Yuan's life and clasped onto him like a barnacle. It annoyed the shit out of him. Shen Yuan's space wasn't his own anymore. He had someone to go to the corner store with. A bastard who slept in his bed for months and kicked Shen Yuan to the couch cushions, now permanently warped with his imprint. No amount of fluffing could get them to be the same.

Despite all the negatives, and there were *many* , they never seemed to matter in the end. When he got particularly frustrated at something idiotic his homosexual roommate did, all

was forgotten in due time. One charged look in his direction, one sneaky tease that made Liu Qingge blush was all it took.

Rose-coloured glasses, and all that corny shit.

After they did *that* at the hotel that fateful night, Shen Yuan initially wasn't sure how to feel. He had passed out immediately after Liu Qingge had bullied two orgasms out of him and woke up with a hazy memory of the night before. He found himself tucked into Liu Qingge's side when he woke up with a pounding headache, and even then it took him more than a few minutes to realize that he was naked as a newborn under the blankets.

He'd panicked, kicking his legs around the sheets to fumble out of bed only to stand and—

Crumple immediately to the floor.

His lower back throbbed so violently he felt he would be ill. What could possibly have warranted this kind of pain?!

Ah, yes. Then it had hit him. The flashbacks of Liu Qingge hovering above him with a predatory gaze, his hands kneading Shen Yuan's body like dough and wrapping a tight fist around his cock until Shen Yuan nearly whited out. And then he'd…

This was all too humiliating!!

At the time, Shen Yuan couldn't believe he had taken Liu Qingge's impressive pillar up his ass and he kind of *liked* it!? He was going to die. He would drown himself in the hot tub and drown himself again in the ocean.

But he didn't have time to because Liu Qingge had woken up to the *thunk* of Shen Yuan's body hitting the floor. He gazed down at him quizzically, eyes raking over Shen Yuan's bare skin.

Shen Yuan had to tug a sheet down to cover himself before Liu Qingge could get any more ideas.

Then they had packed their bags in silence, hopping into a taxi and then back on the train.

Shen Yuan hadn't been able to look at him. As much as he told himself to regret everything, pretend it never happened, tell Liu Qingge it didn't mean anything and was over between them, he couldn't stop thinking about the pounding in his heart when he stood up from the hot tub, taking steps towards the Bai Zhan War God with his dark eyes.

And then when Liu Qingge's palms had touched his skin, it was like he had exploded into a million tiny particles of *finally, finally, finally* .

Everything was right, in those moments. Shen Yuan didn't have the sense to think about what would happen *after* .

He had had *lots* of time on the train to think about the after. He worked himself into a nice, throbbing headache, thinking of what to say to Liu Qingge, what not to say, what to do, what

not to do. All that thinking and he still hadn't managed to make any more sense of his situation.

But when they'd made it home and dumped their bags on the floor, Liu Qingge's heavy trophy settling on the island, Liu Qingge found solace against Shen Yuan's mouth for a brief, but deep, kiss.

Shen Yuan hadn't had time to react before Liu Qingge skipped off to the shower, leaving Shen Yuan to start unpacking with not a single thought in his brain.

Liu Qingge had come out of the shower, droplets trailing down his chest. "I'm going to bed," he grumbled, and the bedroom door was shut behind him.

Shen Yuan lay on the couch that night, wide awake.

He had laid there for two more sleepless nights before something was finally addressed.

"Do you want to—" Liu Qingge harumphed one night, not unlike that of a typical Chinese grandpa, "—sleep in your own bed." It was a question, just based on the word structure alone, but the intonation was uncertain and choppy. Was he forfeiting the mattress, finally? Or was he suggesting…

"With—"

Liu Qingge's face darkened with a stormy expression. "Forget it." He had hmphed again and stomped off.

But—! The chance to sleep in his own bed! Shen Yuan would take it. His poor, poor spine had suffered such immense pains and aches since being subjected to the couch cushions all that time ago. "Wait!" He had squealed, gathering his misshapen pillow and glasses that he had rested haphazardly on the floor.

It felt like Christmas! Shen Yuan took a running leap towards his mattress, and his body instantly sunk into the plush bed. It was big, and warm, and cozy, and…smelled like Liu Qingge. A scent he could practically taste in his mouth.

Something was missing. "Where's the pillow?"

Liu Qingge had grimaced. "It's gone."

Gone ? "Like, completely gone?!" Shen Yuan had spent a whole monthly allowance on those printed images of Luo Binghe! He had eaten only the cheapest instant ramen for a whole month! "Why?"

The Peak Lord snorted. "That demon has no place in a bedroom. In *this* bedroom."

"Liu Qingge…" Understanding dawned, now. "Are you, perhaps, jealous of my dearest Luo Binghe?" The corners of his mouth ached from the stretch of his wide grin. He was only teasing, of course, thoughts of Luo Binghe had fallen to the wayside since Liu Qingge had shoved his way past Shen Yuan's defenses.

In the dimness of the room, Shen Yuan watched Liu Qingge's hands tighten into fists. Those fists won MMA championships. "I'm not *jealous* ." He hissed.

Shen Yuan cackled with glee. Fuck the expensive pillow, seeing Liu Qingge so worked up over mere references to Luo Binghe was infinitely more fun.

" *Don't* bring him back in here," Liu Qingge had growled. Then he had crawled under the covers beside Shen Yuan to shut him up and the rest was history.

With the sharing of the bed came an increase in *other* activities.

Like now, Shen Yuan found himself trapped under Liu Qingge's body, mouth occupied by taking an eager tongue that swirled around his own. His own shirt had been discarded some time ago, lying lonely in the middle of the living room floor.

Having accepted his fate, Shen Yuan's palms slid under Liu Qingge's top to feel the solidness of his body.

Under his fingertips he felt the warped patterns of scars. He broke away from Liu Qingge's crushing kisses to observe them. Liu Qingge shed his shirt, letting it flutter to the ground. When he couldn't pull Shen Yuan's focus away from the marks, he leaned down to scrape his teeth along Shen Yuan's neck. He gasped but remained focused. "H-how did you get them?"

Liu Qingge hummed against Shen Yuan's collarbone. "Fighting."

"No shit, Sherlock."

Liu Qingge drew back. "Sher—"

"Don't worry about it."

Liu Qingge leaned down to resume his attack on Shen Yuan's throat.

" *Wait* —" Shen Yuan scrambled out from underneath Liu Qingge. He sat up, one hand pressed against Liu Qingge's firm, rounded pec at arms-length. "How did you get them, though? I want to know."

Liu Qingge frowned. He didn't like being interrupted, especially when it was something as important as getting intimately connected to Shen Yuan's body. However, Shen Yuan knew how to stroke his ego and he knew there was little more Liu Qingge liked than bragging about his conquests.

Maybe this would also distract him enough for Shen Yuan to catch his breath for just a moment. Liu Qingge was insatiable when it came to intimacy. He pushed Liu Qingge to turn around and traced his finger along a tiny scar along his left shoulder. It looked old. "What's this from?" He used his nail to scrape along it and watch Liu Qingge shiver.

He watched the goosebumps slide up the backs of Liu Qingge's arms. "…Training exercise," He finally said.

Shen Yuan's brow furrowed. "How old were you?"

He sniffed, embarrassed. "Eleven."

Shen Yuan's heart grew a little warm and fuzzy imagining an eleven-year-old Liu Qingge filled with rage and passion, swinging around a stick pretending it was a sword. "Can't you use…" he paused. This could be a sensitive topic. "…Qi to heal it?"

Liu Qingge stiffened, but only barely. "I like the reminder."

That was fair. A memory of his childhood. "What about this one?" The scar was huge, and must have been deep at one point. It trailed from the right side of his throat all the way down to his left hip bone in a diagonal line. He didn't want to think about the blood that probably seeped from this wound, staining the dirt and his robes until it was treated.

But Liu Qingge's shoulders straightened. "That's from when I became Peak Lord."

A smile danced on Shen Yuan's lips. He knew the lore. A disciple Liu Qingge would have challenged his master to a battle and finally emerged victorious after holding the tip of his sword to his shizun's throat.

"How old were you then?"

"Twenty-two." He didn't try to disguise the pride in his voice. It must have been quite an accomplishment for someone so young.

It was sad, in retrospect, that Liu Qingge hadn't been given much of a backstory in *Proud Immortal Demon Way* , because as he explained more about the battles he fought and won, Shen Yuan hung onto every single word. Why didn't Airplane write this!? Why did he have to go and kill off Liu Qingge when he had so many stories to tell?! Shen Yuan would never forgive him.

The others, as Liu Qingge described, were from a variety of battles: some from great, monstrous beasts that Shen Yuan had read about in *PIDW* , others from wars, fights between friends. More training incidents. Shen Yuan noticed all the scars came with some sort of heroic or dramatic story.

"Do you keep the scars you got from stupid things?"

"What do you mean, 'stupid things'?"

Shen Yuan could see it in his mind. "I don't know, tripping down the stairs, accidentally stabbing yourself with Cheng Luan, et cetera, et cetera."

Liu Qingge scoffed. "I would never do that."

Shen Yuan was quiet, but he wasn't so sure. It wasn't hard to envision Liu Qingge storming off in a huff, only to trip over his own feet. He would then likely punch everyone in embarrassment.

There were fewer scars on Liu Qingge's front, but still some. Their breaths grew shallow as Shen Yuan traced over them, pausing to let Liu Qingge explain until he hovered at the cavern between Liu Qingge's ribs. This scar rivaled his Peak Lord victory. Knowing Liu Qingge, Shen Yuan suspected he would have attempted to wrap it up himself before seeking professional medical help. How far did he have to drag himself back to Cang Qiong Mountain in such a bloodied state?

"This one…" Shen Yuan murmured, chest tightening.

Liu Qingge avoided his gaze. It must have been a sensitive topic. "I was…trying to rescue someone."

That was all he said about it. Shen Yuan wasn't sure if he wanted to press and ask if the rescue was successful, or *who* he was trying to save. A little part of him longed to know, but maybe it was better not to ask. Something in his gut told him he wouldn't like the answer.

"Who did it?" Maybe that would be better, if Liu Qingge could brag about the beast he slayed.

But he wasn't smiling at that. "...Luo Binghe."

A complicated wave of resentment and confusion washed over Shen Yuan. There was his favourite character, acting boldly and being kickass, but his boyfriend was sitting in front of him, sharing vulnerable moments of loss and hurt.

Shen Yuan wasn't sure how to feel. So he just said: "that bastard." It was true! Luo Binghe was a bastard. Airplane didn't exactly make him likable, but his audience rooted for him and his revenge arc nonetheless.

Liu Qingge looked at him then, eyes dark with lust. His own hand lifted, pad of the middle finger pressing the center of Shen Yuan's chest, on his own scar. He spoke, voice gravelly, "And this?"

Embarrassment flooded his cheeks. "Oh, haha, it's nothing, just from childhood."

Liu Qingge leaned into him, hovering, until Shen Yuan's spine fell against the mattress. "Tell me." It was a demand, but not threatening. He continued to run his finger along it, mapping out every curve and uneven bump.

So Shen Yuan told him.

"I have heart problems." It was a rocky start to the truth, a broad summary, not at all what Liu Qingge was looking for. "Ever since I was a kid, I've always been getting sick."

He didn't like explaining this part about his life to anyone; it was humiliating and borderline traumatic. Those sterile, white walls, and lonely nights on a rickety cot haunted him. "I was in and out of the hospital since I was three." He squeezed his eyes shut, remembering. "It took them so long to find out what was wrong. They took so many tests, opened and closed

up my chest so many times." He could practically smell the anesthesia assaulting his nose now, see the blinding whiteness of the fluorescent lights.

Shen Yuan's voice grew soft. He couldn't look at Liu Qingge for this part. "Just when I had started to recover from a surgery, they would pry me open again, only to find that the problem had never been solved."

Liu Qingge's palm on the scar was warm, grounding.

He answered the question Liu Qingge must have been thinking. "I was in and out for fifteen years."

Shen Yuan's stomach sunk. All those years spent alone while his parents phoned and visited specialists on his behalf. Missing school field trips and starting to make friends in the hospital only for them to leave weeks later until Shen Yuan didn't bother to try anymore. Finding solace in books and web novels his sister recommended to him whenever she could get away from school to visit, the longer the better. Those characters provided a comfort he never found elsewhere.

Liu Qingge wasn't a good speaker. After listening to Shen Yuan's saga about his surgeries, his time in the hospital as a child, his pitiful, fragile heart, Liu Qingge leaned down and pressed a tender kiss to the scar.

Tingles ricocheted through Shen Yuan's body. Liu Qingge's kiss wasn't lustful or deep, just a soft push of his lips against Shen Yuan's skin.

Something had shifted within him. Someone had heard him. Shen Yuan hadn't realized he needed to be heard until now. Full of bravery, he tugged Liu Qingge down to meet his mouth.

Liu Qingge didn't even take a full second to reciprocate Shen Yuan's kiss. He positioned himself over him, knee sliding between his legs and Shen Yuan lazily ground on his thigh while his fingers tangled in Liu Qingge's loose hair. It was soft and silky between his fingers, and every time he tugged on it, Liu Qingge would sigh or groan past his lips.

Liu Qingge's mouth was warm and heavy on Shen Yuan's, kissing slow and deep. He was relentless in his kisses, never separating for air. In fact, when Shen Yuan squirmed or whined for breath, Liu Qingge took it as a sign to kiss more passionately, his tongue pressing into Shen Yuan's mouth.

Even if Shen Yuan could search for oxygen, Liu Qingge would take the opportunity to kiss and bite along Shen Yuan's jaw and throat, littering them with bruises and marks.

The Peak Lord's hands alternated between kneading Shen Yuan's waist and sliding up his torso to palm his chest and pinch his nipples. Every time he did this, Shen Yuan would gasp, providing the perfect chance for Liu Qingge to smirk and kiss him again.

The sensations were so thick and thrilling. Liu Qingge was an expert at multitasking, and not long into their passionate make-out session Shen Yuan was overwhelmed and dizzy.

These touches felt different today, with the weight of their confessions floating openly between them. Though eager, the two felt a care and intention they hadn't before.

"L-Liu-gege—" With shaky hands, Shen Yuan attempted to catch a breath, pushing the Peak Lord away.

He only groaned at the affectionate name, hand moving to palm Shen Yuan's rock-hard cock.

Shen Yuan leapt three feet into the air.

"What's wrong?" Liu Qingge asked, barely out of breath. It looked as if he were just getting started. His dark gaze flickered to Shen Yuan's clothed bottom half.

He shifted uncomfortably under Liu Qingge's stare. They'd touched and, he hated to admit it, fucked before, but when Liu Qingge put all of his attention onto him, Shen Yuan couldn't help but shy away.

Liu Qingge gripped Shen Yuan's dick firmly. "Does it not feel good?"

F-fuck! Shen Yuan writhed, his hands fisting the blankets underneath him.

His gaze darkened even more, somehow. Liu Qingge settled overtop of Shen Yuan and ground their hips together just once.

With just that one movement Shen Yuan was seeing stars.

Of *course* it felt good! What kind of heartless person would shrug at a touch like that?!

Liu Qingge pressed a soft kiss to Shen Yuan's cheek. The rough War God of Bai Zhan too had his moments of gentleness and tenderness. He continued to slowly roll their clothed pelvises together, never taking his eyes from Shen Yuan's face.

"S-stop looking at me like that!" Shen Yuan cried. His hands left Liu Qingge's solid torso to cover his burning cheeks.

Liu Qingge rumbled low and throaty. He gripped Shen Yuan's wrists and pinned them beside his head. "Let me see you."

It was always like this. Liu Qingge had some weird fixation with watching Shen Yuan's every reaction to anything he did. It made him horribly embarrassed. He was never good at hiding his true feelings anyways, so when Liu Qingge would touch him a certain way, everything was on show.

Sometimes he just wished Liu Qingge would get a move on with it so he wouldn't be subject to revealing every humiliating response to the skim of Liu Qingge's fingers.

"Just put it in already, would you?" He'd grumble under his breath.

Liu Qingge would huff a breath of laughter. "I like to look at you."

Shen Yuan would swat at Liu Qingge's chest and turn his face into the blankets as best he could. "Enough of this nonsense…"

And then Liu Qingge would enter him in one swift thrust. Lost in the throes of passion, he would long forget his desire to memorize every twitch of Shen Yuan's cheek or furrowing of his eyebrows.

So this is how it went: more teasing kisses and purposeful strokes, until they found themselves naked as the day they were born, too lost in their feelings to care. And if Shen Yuan ever started to, Liu Qingge would make quick work of getting him to forget.

Sliding an arm under Shen Yuan's body, Liu Qingge rolled him on top, chest to chest. Liu Qingge's hair spilled out underneath his head like an inky ocean flooding the sheets. Before Shen Yuan could realize that their, *ahem* , members were pressed right together, Liu Qingge cupped the back of his neck to connect their lips again. With that, he rolled his hips upward, swallowing Shen Yuan's yelp of surprise.

Liu Qingge's strong hands squeezed and pulled Shen Yuan's cheeks before daring to breach with a single digit.

The initial sting always caught him off-guard, along with the uncomfortable sensation of being worked open and stretched. To appease him, Liu Qingge continued to grind against Shen Yuan's hips, effectively distracting him.

Growing impatient, Shen Yuan sat up, and Liu Qingge took his hand away. His lips burned from the sensitivity of Liu Qingge's biting kisses, and his hole fluttered and clenched with emptiness. Shen Yuan eyed the small bottle of lube on the nightstand, and Liu Qingge reacted instantly, passing it to him.

With shaky hands, Shen Yuan flicked the cap open. He twisted his body around, squeezing some gel directly onto Liu Qingge's erect cock. The man beneath him flinched at the cold, but his eyes never left Shen Yuan. He started to sit up.

Shen Yuan stopped him, clammy palms on Liu Qingge's chest. "Stay…down…" he panted.

Liu Qingge released a shuddery breath, seeming to understand.

Lifting himself up, Shen Yuan grit his teeth and eased himself onto Liu Qingge's tip.

It hurt like a motherfucker. Liu Qingge was extremely well-endowed, so getting impaled in the ass wasn't pleasant. It always took a few thrusts to find that deliciously sweet spot inside of him, but once Liu Qingge with his skilled hips nudged him there, he was scarily consistent and the pain began to melt away into pleasure.

He sank down, inch by painful inch, feeling as if Liu Qingge's dick had pierced him all the way through.

Liu Qingge, on the other hand, looked like a god, lounging against the pillows. He *was* a god and Shen Yuan his humble servant; his personal fuck toy, if you will.

Liu Qingge's hand lazily rested on Shen Yuan's hip as he lifted himself off his cock only to sink back down again. The burning of Liu Qingge's hand grounded him, despite the trembling of his legs.

Why was the man's pillar so huge?! Cold sweat beaded on Shen Yuan's forehead and shoulders with each shaky rock of his hips. And no matter how long Shen Yuan impaled himself with Liu Qingge's cock, the man never seemed to come!

Instead, he stared at him with a gaze coated in lust, a dangerous smile tilting the edges of his lips. Who knew what he was thinking.

"Y-you," Shen Yuan huffed, "could put some f-fucking effort in, you know that, right?"

Black spots danced in his vision after Liu Qingge's length was suddenly thrust inside him. His hole clenched like a vice grip while his thighs shook from the intrusion. He was seated completely on Liu Qingge's pulsing cock, ass flush with Liu Qingge's hips.

Liu Qingge was also having a hard time adjusting, leaning forward to groan shamelessly into Shen Yuan's throat. But he didn't stay still for long. Unable to resist the way Shen Yuan gripped his whole cock inside of him, Liu Qingge rocked his hips with shallow thrusts.

"Nngh—" With each movement, little moans tumbled from Shen Yuan's lips. The angle of his head brushed directly against Shen Yuan's prostate.

Oh god, oh god, this was a mistake. Shen Yuan had nowhere to hide here. This position gave Liu Qingge a perfect view of his face, twitching with discomfort and pleasure. His own legs didn't have the strength to get him somewhere safer, and the sheets were too far to hide himself in. All he could do was submit to the tingling in his waist and the urgency of Liu Qingge's thrusts as he grew close.

Then, a tight fist wrapped around Shen Yuan's own dick, a few fast jerks given before Shen Yuan could prepare. "W-wait," he whined, weakly slapping Liu Qingge's bulging bicep, but one more twist and Shen Yuan went blind.

Distantly, he could register the sounds of his own staccato-ed groans as white painted Liu Qingge's torso. He squeezed around Liu Qingge's throbbing member inside of him and, a few jolts later, was filled with his hot release.

The unholy sounds from Liu Qingge's mouth against his ear only kept the stars in Shen Yuan's vision dancing longer, before he collapsed, boneless, against Liu Qingge's cum-covered chest.

Shen Yuan's legs trembled, and a tiny whimper escaped his lips when Liu Qingge fell back to the bed, still situated inside him.

Shen Yuan couldn't think. What was there to think about? His entire body was numb and limp, completely spent.

Liu Qingge on the other hand…

Shen Yuan’s ass would never be the same.

Chapter End Notes

Cang Qiong sect bois are Built Different....!

check out art for this chapter (by me) here !

Chapter 25: This Heart Beats for You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dating Shen Yuan didn't change many things.

Life went on as usual. Liu Qingge woke up, went to the gym, and came back. He talked with trainers who gave tips he already knew about and punched the sand-filled bags until they broke, spilling all over the floor. The staff members sighed and put in another order on their computer. Heck, while they were at it, why didn't they just order ten bags? Liu Qingge would get through them soon enough.

When he would get back home, Shen Yuan was always there waiting for him, unaware until he greeted Liu Qingge with a shy smile.

Liu Qingge had practiced restraint for most of his life. Granted, he didn't practice restraint when it came to fighting people, or bullying someone, or saying whatever nasty thing was on his mind, but he didn't dual cultivate and he didn't *think* about dual cultivating as much as he could.

But when he saw Shen Yuan's lips pull into a grin, or when he put down that motherfucking phone to talk to him and ask about his day, or when he gathered the bravery to affectionately twirl Liu Qingge's hair around his fingers, Liu Qingge suddenly had a *very difficult* time not thinking about dual cultivating.

Though it served no qi-replenishing purpose, the act of having sex was indeed extremely satisfying. If he allowed himself to think about ravishing Shen Yuan, he would push him to the couch cushions and take him right then and there. But he couldn't.

Instead, Liu Qingge clenched his fists.

He had to be careful around Shen Yuan. As often as he longed to touch him, Shen Yuan would sometimes recoil or push him away. Initially, Liu Qingge was hurt by the rejections, fearing the worst, that Shen Yuan regretted everything and no longer wanted him, but he soon came to realize it was the man's own awkwardness and insecurities. In a short amount of time, he would make his feelings known by delivering a teasing comment or coughing once into his fist with a furious blush before skimming his fingers along Liu Qingge's throat.

Then Liu Qingge would know it was okay.

He would try to be gentle; he knew it must not have been easy to be impaled with a dick such as his own, but Shen Yuan's desperate noises and trembling thighs always broke his resolve, and soon he was fucking Shen Yuan's hole like the depraved animal he was.

And Shen Yuan took it like a champion every time. His body always looked ethereally perfect stretched around Liu Qingge's cock.

But sometimes Shen Yuan would initiate other ways; he would lean close and brush his mouth across Liu Qingge's cheek, or shoulder, or his own lips. Sometimes he would get lost in these feelings, pushing Liu Qingge to the wall, or against the couch cushions, or tugging him impossibly closer, his tongue eagerly darting out to slip between Liu Qingge's parted lips.

Liu Qingge liked to think himself strong—he *was* strong, but when Shen Yuan was the first to touch, he became like a trembling bird, overwhelmed and delighted all at once.

Life went on.

They went to festivals and awful concerts sung by fake blue-haired people and sat on benches by the river and dared to skim the tips of their fingers together when walking side by side. They tasted food from places Liu Qingge couldn't ever have dreamed of and watched films that broke reality and they tasted every flavour of instant noodles and tasted it again off each other's lips.

Shen Yuan would go to Liu Qingge's competitions and Liu Qingge would sit through every painful episode of Shen Yuan's reality TV that he hated but he endured because of him.

Liu Qingge would teach Shen Yuan how to hold Cheng Luan and practice a few fluid movements before expertly extracting the blade from his grasp with a single hand to pull Shen Yuan close to his body.

Life went on.

They stayed out until the early morning and watched the outskirts of the city begin to wake up with the same rising sun Liu Qingge had woken up with not too long ago. They dressed in historical clothes during the day and undressed each other at night.

They went to coffee shops that also were full of raccoons, for some reason, and Liu Qingge discovered hobbies apart from the gym, like basketball and tennis and football and volleyball and rock climbing and found clubs for all of them. Liu Qingge brought money in from his MMA competitions and Shen Yuan considered getting a job but didn't because why would he?

They went on hikes and played board games on Shen Yuan's living room floor. They tried to learn traditional Chinese instruments and failed, Shen Yuan's tender and clumsy fingers plucking the strings in painful attempts at melodies and Liu Qingge's calloused hands snapping the cords in frustration.

They drank alcohol after dinner and stacked the cans into pyramids, they tried to paint pictures, and Liu Qingge with his classical training and formal upbringing drew a depiction of two lovers standing under flowering willow trees after tearing into five canvases when he wasn't satisfied with his results and Shen Yuan painted large green creatures that he claimed died long ago. The paint dripped onto the floorboards and stained their clothes, ink seeping into the unique patterns of their fingerprints.

Life went on.

They did laundry and cooked dinner. They sat on the couch and said nothing. They read books side by side until Liu Qingge felt the urge to *move* and then would do push ups until Shen Yuan noticed him. He would roll his eyes and call Liu Qingge a brute but place a fleeting kiss to his forehead anyway. They played Shen Yuan's silly computer games and bought new ones, sharing a controller until Liu Qingge finally got his own. They were opponents, they were teammates.

They fell asleep in each other's arms. Shen Yuan whispered Liu Qingge's name on his throat and Liu Qingge stroked his scalp, not remembering what life was like before him. Not caring to.

Their fingers knotted together and grew damp with sweaty warmth. It should have grossed them out, but neither were brave enough to pull away. When feeling courageous, Shen Yuan would trace his lips along Liu Qingge's scars, and find the moles that hid behind his ear, under his eye, on his elbow, peppering his hips.

Liu Qingge became tender, and Shen Yuan became open.

"Liu Qingge," Shen Yuan would breathe in the dark.

"Hm," Liu Qingge would hum back, half asleep.

"Nothing," Shen Yuan would say, a smile shaping his words.

He thought of the sect less and less. Of course he missed what he had. The battles, the glory, the qi churning in his body. The annoying and incompetent disciples, the comfort of his own room.

But he had also been angry. And lonely. And lacking.

Every night he had laid in his bed, eyebrows permanently furrowed. Since adopting the responsibilities of a Peak Lord, he hadn't felt relaxed. Even as a teenager, a child, his countenance was unnaturally violent and brash.

He believed that's just the way he was. He wasn't soft or gentle or delicate or loving. Every cell inside him was designed to destroy and destruct.

He still was many of these things, to be fair, but since arriving in this foreign land and meeting Shen Yuan, his body had been rewritten against his will.

He wouldn't change it for anything else.

Today they were outside, enjoying the last of the warm weather. The vibrant green leaves that greeted Liu Qingge when he had arrived in this foreign land now turned a warm and inviting orange, swaying gently to the ground.

Ice cream cones grew sticky in their hands. Liu Qingge wasn't big into sweets, but in the autumn sunshine it was the perfect treat to cool his insides. The walnut and vanilla scoops melted into one homogeneous flavour. Shen Yuan had already devoured his cone of bubblegum and a flavour dangerously titled 'double chocolate brownie cookie explosion

supreme'. Liu Qingge had hardly made it two licks into his dessert before Shen Yuan was crunching into the cone and then doubling over in pain, complaining of a stomach ache which was no one's fault but his own.

"It hurts," he groaned, clutching his gut.

"You shouldn't have eaten it so fast, idiot." It would have helped his pain, but also would have increased the pain for Liu Qingge as he would have to observe Shen Yuan's pink tongue darting out to lick up melty drop after melty drop. Naturally, the sight would have caused Liu Qingge's mouth to go dry and for his toes to curl in his shoes.

It was better this way. Maybe later he would attempt to delve deep enough to taste the remnants of flavours on the roof of Shen Yuan's mouth.

Before his mind could wander to entertain such ideas, Shen Yuan spoke. "Do you like…being here?" They sat along the river, Shen Yuan's feet swinging idly above the surface of the water.

Liu Qingge scoffed. What kind of question was that? "What kind of question is that?"

It was rare to see Shen Yuan so self-conscious and unsure of himself outside of sex. He often didn't give a shit about what anyone thought of him, so he felt free to act lazily and informally around Liu Qingge from the start. "I guess I'm asking if you're happy."

Now he grew confused. Happy about what? Their relationship? Ah, but Shen Yuan had mentioned ' *here* '. Liu Qingge thought he knew what he meant now.

What did it mean to be happy? Sure, Liu Qingge had felt fleeting moments of joy in his lifetime, but never a consistent, long-term happiness. But Shen Yuan was sitting beside him, the breeze teasing the strands of his hair like in some cheesy romance film.

Something in his chest ached and twanged.

Identifying emotions was never something Liu Qingge was good at. It made him uncomfortable, discussing his feelings with someone. But, admitting happiness wasn't hard to say, right?

Liu Qingge couldn't bring himself to say the words. The setting sun warmed his face and ears. He caught a glimpse of Shen Yuan's shoulders beginning to droop, just a tad. "I—" he blurted, not wanting Shen Yuan to get the wrong idea. *Ugh* , this was humiliating. "…am happy." He wished his hair was out of its ponytail so he could have something to hide behind.

Silent, Shen Yuan returned his stare to the flowing river, lips rolling together to try and hide his smile. Liu Qingge, ever perceptive when it came to matters regarding Shen Yuan (except for when he wasn't), missed none of those subtle twitches at the corners of his lips. Nor did he miss the way Shen Yuan's pinky finger reached out to skim Liu Qingge's knuckle.

Later that night, Liu Qingge did as he desired. He searched for the lingering flavour of ice cream on Shen Yuan's lips and caressed the skin that had been warmed by the sunshine.

Shen Yuan shuddered and sighed underneath him, face pink with lust and embarrassment. He pulled Liu Qingge back down to meet his awaiting mouth and rocked his hips against Liu Qingge's when they were connected.

And in the midst of it, he traced the scar over the heart that fought so hard to live. Its frantic pulses called out to him: '*this heart beats for you'* .

Afterwards, Liu Qingge held him tight in his arms, feeling the rise and fall of his bare chest skim against his own until it was so gentle he had to concentrate to feel it. Shen Yuan's breaths puffed against his throat, shallow from sleep.

He thought of that tender flower he held in his palms so long ago. The Thousand-Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire. The pink and lavender petals had mocked him at first. They were such a delicate and soft colour, reminding him of the way he would never be, the things he would never have.

He remembered Shen Qingqiu's knowing eyes peering at him over the top of his fan. Like he was on the verge of letting Liu Qingge in on some special secret only to deny him the satisfaction of knowing.

What secrets Shen Qingqiu held Liu Qingge would never know. He didn't need to.

As horrible and terrible and awful and embarrassing as it was to admit, Liu Qingge had everything he needed. His heart's eternal desire, what he craved the most, was right here.

Liu Qingge closed his eyes and fell asleep to the warmth of entangled limbs, content.

fin

Chapter End Notes

This concludes our main story :') It's been a wild ride and I really appreciate all the comments and love! Thank you so much for sticking around to watch these two dingbats realize their feelings for each other...

Stay tuned for bonus chapters that didn't fit into the main story!

Chapter 26: Side Story 2: Jealousy

Chapter Notes

> This chapter takes place shortly after chapter 4, when Shen Yuan sends his email to Airplane :)
>
> .
>
> TW: slight dubcon??

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The email was a bad omen, somehow.

Airplane had seen it the instant it appeared in his inbox, of course, he *was* chronically online.

Originally, he would have laughed at the text on the screen. This Peerless Cucumber really did have words for Airplane despite paying extra to access chapters earlier than the general public. It was a fun game Airplane liked to play. He would publish a buffer chapter and refresh his banking app until he saw the money roll in. Less than an hour later would be an exquisitely-detailed email outlining all the problems with the chapter from his most devoted fan.

The esteemed author would laugh, occasionally respond and thank Peerless Cucumber for his feedback, he would be *sure* to implement it next time (a lie).

But this email came not after the release of a well-planned chapter, it came in the middle of a dry spell (with writing, that is).

He was expecting another laugh, something he could cheers to before taking a swig of an energy drink.

Airplane did not get that.

All-too-quickly, he realized what was happening. The Liu Qingge cosplayer who was convinced of being the character, the confusion, the Cheng Luan replica. It sounded horribly familiar. Discomfort settled in his gut.

Swiveling around in his chair that Peerless Cucumber's spite had paid for, Airplane stared right into the eyes of his own personal parasite living in his apartment.

Mobei-Jun was sitting on a chair directly behind Airplane, as usual. In fact, this was one of the better days, as most times he leaned on the author's shoulders, nibbling his ear lobe or twirling his hair around his long finger.

He swallowed at the sight of the imposing man.

Mobei-Jun was massive, of course, more than a head taller than Airplane, which was his own fault when he designed the demon king. His hair was so black it shone almost blue and hung elegantly straight down his shoulders. Despite Airplane's best efforts, Mobei-Jun refused to wear anything different than what he arrived in: those dramatic and regal robes with a fur-lined cape certainly not suitable for summer. Instead of being sensible and taking off the damn clothes, he rather insisted that Airplane blast the air conditioner 24/7. At night he would weep silently at the inevitable cooling bill he'd receive in the mail. He couldn't afford this! So while Mobei-Jun remained comfortable in the frigid atmosphere, Airplane had to throw on all sorts of layers just to stop his teeth from chattering.

When Mobei-Jun felt the eyes of his supposed servant on him, he perked up, face remaining impassive, but he leaned forward in his chair, elbows resting on his knees.

The focused stare on Airplane's mouth didn't go unnoticed and had him flushing with heat, contrary to the chill of the room. "Say," Airplane squeaked, "do you happen to know someone by the name of Liu Qingge?"

Mobei-Jun didn't even need to think. "Yes," he said plainly, gaze never wavering. He alternated cracking knuckles on his large hands. "Do you need me to kill him?"

Airplane wanted to cry. "No, god no."

Mobei-Jun's shoulders relaxed. He grunted.

"What do you know about him?"

Airplane could tell that Mobei-Jun would rather talk about anything else, that he'd rather be digging his large palms into Airplane's skin and making the author quake beneath his body. Despite all that, he leaned back in his chair, crossing his muscular arms across his equally-muscular chest and spreading his muscular thighs apart.

Airplane had to resist the urge to worry his bottom lip between his teeth. He really outdid himself when creating this man! He was practically sex on legs!

"Liu Qingge attempted to fight Luo Binghe every day for five years to bring Shen Qingqiu's corpse back to Cang Qiong Mountain. Luo Binghe beat him, of course."

Hold on . What was Mobei-Jun saying? Cannon fodder Liu Qingge, who died at the hands of Shen Qingqiu in the Ling Xi Caves, fought Airplane's most beloved baby boy protagonist every day for five years to collect Shen Qingqiu's corpse? Literally none of this made sense. Airplane himself was well aware he came up with the most convoluted plot lines, but he had never written anything of the sort. Nor had he even *imagined* anything of the sort. Why was Liu Qingge still alive?

"*What* ?"

Mobei-Jun picked at his nails, bored. He was tired of this topic already.

“No, please continue, what do you mean Liu Qingge fought to get Shen Qingqiu’s body back from Luo Binghe? They hate each other!” There was no logical reason Airplane could think of that could warrant such behaviour. Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu had hated each other and fought from the beginning in Airplane’s notes. All the unpublished lore was at the forefront of his mind. Shen Qingqiu had accidentally killed him after Airplane fed the readers a dramatic flashback that recalled their days as young disciples.

Liu Qingge, a boy who thought with his fists before his brain and said whatever cruel thing was on his mind, often picked fights with the feral Shen Jiu. Though Liu Qingge was raised in an affluent family, he acted just as brutishly, if not more, than the boy who had been bought and sold like mere merchandise.

Regardless, it was near impossible to get them to stop bickering. When words weren’t enough, then they would play nasty tricks on each other. When the pranks couldn’t encompass their mutual hatred, they would resort to physical fights. Soon, fists turned into weapons. Weapons turned into qi. They could hardly be civil during Peak Lord meetings and events. It was required that they sit as far away from each other as possible; that they didn’t speak directly to each other lest one get offended and set the whole mountain range on fire.

So why now were they defending each other?

Of all the possible reasons Airplane could think of, none of them seemed to fit with this idea of Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge being more than civil towards each other. Being *friends* , even.

Airplane didn’t know what question to ask first. Everything felt so important. He finally settled on “Were Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu friends?”

Mobei-Jun’s brow furrowed at Airplane’s use of past tense. “Mn.”

Okay, the answer made no sense, but at least that question was out of the way. “Why did my so—Luo Binghe—have Shen Qingqiu’s body? What did he do with him?”

“Why is Qinghua asking?” Mobei-Jun didn’t bother to hide his irritation. The icing on the cake was the twitching muscle in his strong jaw. “This King is jealous.”

So brazen! Airplane’s heart fluttered at the implication. Even though he had long since figured out that Mobei-Jun was completely devoted and besotted by him (still a mystery why, to be honest), it still caused his stomach to perform backflips. He melted. “Liu Qingge, Shen Qingqiu, and Luo Binghe are nothing to worry about,” he said dismissively, and it was true. While each character, no matter how unlikeable, were his precious children, he had scrapped Liu Qingge’s plot arcs to appease the fans’ cries for cheap porn long ago.

But Mobei-Jun didn’t seem convinced.

“*Please* answer the question.”

The Ice King heaved a dramatic sigh. As handsome as he was, he acted like a bratty child sometimes. “Shen Qingqiu absorbed Luo Binghe’s demonic qi and died. Luo Binghe took the

utmost care with his shizun's corpse."

God, if only Mobei-Jun gave a little more detail! Airplane's head was pounding from attempting to extrapolate information from the crumbs Mobei-Jun gave him.

Had Airplane hit his head sometime in the writing process? He could not remember ever writing a scenario where the villain Shen Qingqiu absorbed Luo Binghe's demonic qi. And from the tone of Mobei-Jun's voice, it sounded as if he did so *willingly.* The question was only *why, why, why* ?

Finally, Airplane thought of something that could be useful. "What did the members of Luo Binghe's harem think of him keeping Shen Qingqiu's body?"

Mobei-Jun said nothing for a long time. Was he thinking of each individual member? Recalling some fights that had happened between the women?

Instead, Mobei-Jun only asked: "What harem?" His head tilted slightly to the side, inquisitive, like a puppy.

Airplane scoffed. What did he mean, 'what harem'? Luo Binghe's harem was the stuff of legends! Even people who lived under rocks had heard of Luo Binghe's sexual prowess!

But then Mobei-Jun delivered a fatal blow. "Luo Binghe is married to Shen Qingqiu."

Time stopped.

Let's rewind.

Airplane was just going to laugh at a bizarre email from his favourite hater. He was going to type a snarky, passive aggressive response and never send it.

But now he was here, heart in his throat. Mobei-Jun had just dropped a nuclear bomb on everything Airplane had created.

Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe… *MARRIED* ?!

What was next, Liu Qingge was secretly gay for the man that killed him?

No matter how hard his brain twisted and turned trying to imagine the powerful half-demon as a monogamous gay man, nothing came to fruition.

Oh, okay. "Against his will, right? Right?"

Mobei-Jun shook his head.

"Shen Qingqiu *agreed* to it?"

"Mn."

"Does Shen Qingqiu have all his limbs?"

Mobei-Jun, obviously done with this topic, scooped Airplane in his arms and tossed him onto the bed.

“Wait!” Airplane squealed, kicking his legs in a futile attempt to stop Mobei-Jun from descending onto him. But he was easily subdued by his King’s wide hands wrapping around his thighs. “W-we’re not finished talking yet!” There were so many things he needed to know!

The sweatpants were worked from Airplane’s hips and tugged down his legs. His dick twitched in interest at Mobei-Jun’s big palms on his skin and the fire in his dark eyes, something hot coiling in his gut. His fingers slipped under the waistband of his underwear.

“Okay, okay, okay, but at least tell me: as far as you know Liu Qingge is still alive?”

Mobei-Jun grunted an affirmative while tearing Airplane’s underwear into shreds. Unceremoniously, he lifted Airplane’s hips and swirled a digit around the delicate flower between his cheeks.

Why is he still alive ? But Airplane didn’t have time to ponder, because there was the familiar click of a bottle cap being snapped shut and the uncomfortable feeling of a cold finger being pressed into him.

With each thrust of Mobei-Jun’s finger, Airplane’s erection grew as his body became accustomed to the pressure. “Ah—my King, d-do you know if Liu Qingge is different than before?”

“Mn.”

That didn’t *mean* anything! It wasn’t an affirmative or negative ‘mn’, just a neutral one! Okay, maybe he needed more information. He probably didn’t know what “before” meant.

“I-I mean, is Liu Qingge angry? Or happy? Or does he—” the words were stolen from his mouth. Mobei-Jun leaned down over him, gripping his jaw with one hand and shoving his tongue inside Airplane’s open lips. He melted at the sensation and groaned appreciatively. Mobei-Jun took this opportunity to push another finger inside Airplane’s sensitive channel.

The first time Mobei-Jun had kissed Airplane, it was…um…how should he say it…less than ideal. And that was being kind!

Airplane, for all his horrible smut-writing, often had visions of romance and grandeur that he couldn’t implement into *PIDW* lest it become out of character for his pillaging protagonist.

Every minute he spent with Mobei-Jun was a minute he envisioned the demon sweeping him into his arms, cupping his delicate cheek, and laying an intimate kiss to his lips. There would be cherry blossoms floating through the air (cherry blossom season was long over) and, by pure happenstance, a nearby busker would be playing some romantic tune on the violin. Mobei-Jun would pull back from their passionate kiss and confess his love for Airplane. He’d always loved this author, from the moment he set eyes on him. He was beautiful to him,

every curve and lump on his misshapen body and he definitely didn't mind at all being squeezed together like a can of sardines on his twin bed at nighttime.

Then Mobei-Jun would take him back home where they would make fervent love.

Okay, the real thing was awful!!

Instead of some dreamy walk in the park, Mobei-Jun had cornered him against the wall, looming over like some menacing beast who was about to bite into his freshest catch.

Still new to hosting the Ice King in his humble abode, Airplane feared the worst. It had only been two weeks! While Mobei-Jun stared at him every waking hour of the day (and night, sometimes; *super* creepy, by the way), he still gave off mixed signals. One moment his dark eyes were raking over Airplane's body, slowly, as if he were memorizing every inch and imagining every *unclothed* inch. The next moment he'd be booting Airplane off the bed to sleep on the floor with no remorse.

So, naturally, Airplane convinced himself the man was only keeping him alive for his own entertainment and to do his bidding. Afterwards, he would enjoy feasting on Airplane's body, gnawing at his bones until he was licked clean.

Instead of being swept into his arms against those round biceps that caused him to salivate, Mobei-Jun grabbed his jaw with one hand in a vice grip, so hard Airplane swore he could hear his bones crack. Mobei-Jun had snarled, nose curling.

He kept Airplane in that position for far too long. A second longer and Airplane's knees were sure to give out! Mobei-Jun's fingers would tighten like a noose around his throat and he'd hang there, swinging, until all the breath expelled from his lungs.

Back and forth, back and forth his thoughts flip-flopped. One minute he craved the tenderness of his alluring creation's kiss, and the next he said his final prayers.

But Mobei-Jun had surprised him by doing neither of those things.

Okay, he did lean down to kiss Airplane, but not in the way he would have liked! In retrospect, it was inappropriate for Airplane to assume that Mobei-Jun would be OOC for his sake. The man had not a gentle blood cell in his body.

Mobei-Jun's mouth had smashed against Airplane's so hard it must have bruised. Pointy and polished teeth met in the middle, clacking together. Airplane's hands and legs floundered, until his palms landed on Mobei-Jun's pillowy pecs. The real question was: was he trying to push him away or bring him closer?

Romance flew out the window.

If something wasn't working out, Mobei-Jun would just kiss Airplane harder, with more teeth, gnawing at his lips and occasionally nipping his tongue.

This was nothing like Airplane had expected!

Tears stung his eyes at the assault, but he did little to stop it. There was some comfort in being held and crushed to the wall; it had been too long since Airplane had received affection of any kind.

With each passing moment Mobei-Jun grew bolder, hands moving from the wall and his jaw to paw at his body. His fingertips dug into Airplane's skin. Those squeezes made up for the ruthless way he was now tearing at Airplane's throat.

"Qinghua," he rumbled, low and deep, before claiming his mouth again.

This time he was a bit more careful, but he still wasn't allowing Airplane any chance to breathe.

What had brought this on, after all? What was the catalyst? Airplane was dying to ask but knowing his character, Mobei-Jun would just grunt in lieu of answering. Something about being called Qinghua still bothered him, even though he was warming up to the name. He hadn't written Mobei-Jun to be the cleverest of demons, and even though he'd said his own name numerous times, Airplane accepted the loss in favour of his own life.

Since that first kiss Mobei-Jun had improved greatly, but only after Airplane had flailed so hard he'd whacked him across his pronounced cheekbone or pointed chin. After pulling back with a scowl could Airplane then offer some advice.

So now, with his mouth occupied with something much more pleasant than words, Airplane reflected on his superb teaching skills and how well his favourite demon implemented them. He still had things to learn, of course, like not to scratch Airplane with his nails so deep he drew blood, but that only happened when Mobei-Jun was particularly feisty and could be forgotten for now.

But he yanked his head away, not allowing himself to get distracted with memories of the past. "D-does Liu Qingge still fight— *hnngh* —fight demons?"

Mobei-Jun scowled. "Qinghua."

He still *insisted* on using the name of the An Ding Peak Lord rather than his own. Their names did sound similar, but come on. At least say his own name during sex!

"H-huh?" He panted and writhed.

"Can Liu Qingge make you come like this king can?" Mobei-Jun said lowly, his palm pressing Airplane's exposed hips to the bed as he stretched and worked his hole open. Each movement had Airplane quivering helplessly.

"N-no, my King," he stuttered, hands scrambling for purchase amidst the sheets.

The corner of his mouth twitched into a smirk of satisfaction. "Then stop talking about him." Mobei-Jun hummed. Each slide of his thick fingers against his walls only caused his cock to grow harder and harder, a thin line of precome dribbling onto his stomach. He wanted

nothing more than to wrap his fist around it and stroke himself to completion, but past experiences proved that his King wouldn't allow it.

Maybe it was worth a shot to ask. "My King, c-can I—" Those fingers nailed his prostate ruthlessly, massaging it until the rest of Airplane's words transformed into incomprehensible moans.

Mobei-Jun swatted his hand away from inching closer towards his neglected dick. "Don't touch."

Airplane whined, as he so often did. His favourite character was a sadist! What he wouldn't give to limply crawl towards his document and rewrite the Ice Demon to be a little more caring and generous. To not be so handsome so he didn't have to witness that malicious and delicious grin on his pale lips as he brutally fingered him.

When Airplane let his mind wander to all the unanswered questions he had regarding his carefully-written plot scrapped in this confusing, alternate universe, Mobei-Jun would bring him back to the present by pushing up his sweatshirt and tweaking the pink buds on his chest.

With each gasp and complaint, Mobei-Jun would lean down to capture his lips again and kiss him until Airplane was more amenable to being fucked with his king's fingers.

Airplane's brain grew fuzzy. Okay, he'd give up on the questions for now. They could talk another time. His hips rocked into Mobei-Jun's hand of their own volition, his release getting close. "I'm—" he tried to say.

Mobei-Jun smiled, his tongue running across his sharp canine. "Mn." He pistoned his fingers in and out, scraping Airplane's prostate each time.

Airplane wasn't sure if he hated or loved coming untouched. There was something so agonizing about not being able to seek extra relief, and much quicker, by not being allowed to touch his dick, but it was equally as amazing to be fucked only in his hole and force an orgasm because of it. These kinds of orgasms racked through his entire body. His eyes would roll back in his head and he would see white.

That's exactly what happened.

With Mobei-Jun's hand steadying him, Airplane's frame shook as heat travelled from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes. Something hot and sticky splattered on his stomach. Only after he stopped trembling did he realize it was his own cum. Airplane gulped air into his lungs. Just *breathing* seemed impossible to do after an orgasm like that.

Distantly, he realized Mobei-Jun was rolling him onto his stomach. The scratch of the sheets against his deflating dick caused him to whine. Otherwise, his head on the pillow reminded him of how tired he was. From writing, from getting fucked. His eyelids fluttered shut.

They were closed for less than three seconds before they snapped open again.

“My King!” Airplane gasped when Mobei-Jun’s wide tip prodded at his entrance. Wet and relaxed from the earlier orgasm, the blunt head slid right in despite Airplane’s squirming. Mobei-Jun’s hands had lifted his hips from the mattress sometime during those precious three seconds of rest, his ass fully on display for the King to see.

The breath wooshed from Airplane’s lungs at the intrusion. No matter how frequently he was fucked by that cock, it never failed to stretch him so far he saw stars. His body instantly became pliant and weak as Mobei-Jun inched in further. Soon, their hips were pressed together and Airplane was left to blink the tears from his eyelashes.

Even if he wanted to squirm away, it wasn’t possible. Being impaled by Mobei-Jun’s rock-hard cock rendered him immobile.

In a typical Mobei-Jun fashion, he began to gently rock, then thrust forward into Airplane’s softened hole. Instead of hearing the slapping of their hips joining together with each movement, Airplane’s ears only rung.

A series of pitiful “my King”s spilled from his lips as Mobei-Jun used him.

Despite being fucked into unconsciousness, a lazy smile crossed Airplane’s face. Whatever they had been talking about must not have been that important or else he would remember it and not only be thinking of the thick pillar filling him up.

He’d have to ask the questions he had long forgotten by now another time.

Chapter End Notes

shang qinghua best boy

Chapter 27: Bonus: Obligatory Beach Episode

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is a deleted scene from chapter 23: Knockout pt. 2! I knew I wanted a beach scene especially because they were Right There but I could not in good conscience make that chapter any longer than it already was..... so here we are

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After waking up with the early sunrise, as he often did, Liu Qingge would have preferred to immediately go to the gym and punch out his feelings, reveling in the flex of his muscles with each twist of his arm into the punching bag, sensing the tensing of his calves before it actually happened.

But Shen Yuan, uncharacteristically chipper for so early in the morning, didn't give him a chance to escape.

After braiding his hair with much more care than Liu Qingge would have liked from someone he assaulted the previous night, Shen Yuan tossed him a pair of odd-feeling shorts. "Put these on," he said, rummaging around in his messily stuffed suitcase for god knows what.

Because Shen Yuan was too preoccupied, Liu Qingge just shoved down his own shorts and slid on the ones Shen Yuan provided him. They fit well. A little tight around his thighs and shorter than what he wore to train and during his matches, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. If anything, it just accentuated the muscles in his quads and hamstrings. When he finished inspecting, he noticed Shen Yuan's cheeks were dusted pink. It was quite warm with the sun shining in through the windows, after all.

Shen Yuan ducked into the bathroom with his own pile of clothes. When he came out, he was wearing oddly patterned shorts; the background was pale pink, just making him look all the redder, and it was decorated with small pictures of…bananas wearing sunglasses riding bicycles. On top he wore a loose tank top. From the side, Liu Qingge caught a glimpse of his soft nipples, wanting nothing more than to put his mouth on them. What would he taste like across his tongue? What sounds would tumble from Shen Yuan's lips?

He forced the thought away. How disgusting was he to think that!? Now he *really* needed to go to the gym and take some time away. Every second he spent in Shen Yuan's company was a second he had to battle with himself to keep his grubby hands off of him.

Shen Yuan led him to the elevator.

The ride down, all that was running through Liu Qingge's disastrously horny mind was how he could push Shen Yuan against the mirrored wall of the machine and kiss his throat until

Shen Yuan's breath fogged up the glass.

Liu Qingge was saved by the sliding open of the doors to the main lobby. It was packed full of spectators who had rented rooms for the event. Some fighters that Liu Qingge had seen the previous evening lingered in the space, soaking up the attention they received from local reporters and fans.

Blessedly, Shen Yuan didn't force Liu Qingge to talk to anyone. He instead tugged him through the main doors into the sunshine. The rays blinded him, at first, and Shen Yuan too squinted into the natural lighting.

Despite being so early in the morning it was oppressively hot. Sweat beaded on the nape of Liu Qingge's neck.

"There's a path to the beach over here," Shen Yuan said. Together they walked down the twisty and sandy path until they reached the shore. The waves were gently crashing along the beach. It was mostly empty, save a few young families getting their children ready to play in the water by securing puffy tubes around their pudgy arms.

Shen Yuan unfurled a bright-coloured towel onto the sand and sat his ass down. From one of his deep shorts pockets, he whipped out a bottle of slimy white gunk. He smeared some on the bridge of his nose and the tops of his ears. Then he lathered the streaky substance unevenly along his arms and legs. In a swift motion, he pulled his sleeveless shirt over his head and Liu Qingge's knees buckled.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, like Liu Qingge was watching an erotic scene in one of Shen Yuan's movies. His hands, cupping the creamy liquid, trailed from his collarbones down his chest, skimming over his two peaks. They went further to the soft skin of his stomach and waist, wrapping around his body to smear the cream onto his spine. His back arched as gracefully as a cat's when he reached over his shoulders to apply the liquid on his upper back.

Liu Qingge could only imagine what it would look like if he were spreading something else all over—

"Did I get everywhere?" Shen Yuan asked, using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

Liu Qingge's face flamed at being caught. "Yeah," he croaked. "Looks good."

Shen Yuan heaved a sigh and collapsed onto the towel. He plucked off his glasses and rested his forearm over his eyes. "Well? Go frolic in the sea." He waved at Liu Qingge with a dismissive hand.

If that's what it meant to get away from Shen Yuan's bare skin for a while, so be it.

Liu Qingge walked to where the water met the sand, the waves washing over his bare toes. It was refreshing. He waded in deeper, to his knees.

When was the last time he had visited the ocean?

He distantly recalled a time as a child, his faceless parents taking him and his sister to the cliffs. To show off, he'd leap off the tallest rock he could find, hurtling towards the water after performing a series of impressive flips. When he'd resurface, he'd send a hopeful glance to his caregivers, wishing for their approval. They'd give a polite nod and that endorsement would fuel his reckless actions for the rest of the day.

After some time, Liu Mingyan would join him in the water with the help of their parents picking her up and tossing her into the waves. She'd giggle and splash back to be tossed again.

Later on, they went alone, their parents too weary from trying to wrangle the two rebellious Liu siblings. There, Liu Mingyan and Liu Qingge would wrestle each other in the water, Liu Qingge easily winning every time, but not after suffering teeth marks and scratches from her claws.

They'd leave the beach exhausted and tanned, throats raw from salt water.

That was the last time he'd gone. Even on demon-slaying missions he never passed by an ocean or sea of any sort. All he saw were rivers of varying sizes, ranging from a fresh stream to roaring rapids.

The ocean stretched vast before him.

He briefly wondered if drowning himself here would bring him back to Bai Zhan Peak. But Liu Qingge made the mistake of turning around and seeing Shen Yuan wave happily at him from the sand.

He dove under the water, feeling it rush past his ears and soak his hair.

Yes, this could be exercise.

Liu Qingge swam for some time, body effortlessly adapting to the subtle currents of the water. He swam lap after lap with no sense of direction, but never drifted far from the shore. Even if he did, he would have the strength and energy to slice through the waves to make it back.

On the beach, Shen Yuan lay flat on his back. His chest rose and fell gently with each breath. Was he asleep?

Liu Qingge was a little bored of being left alone. Shen Yuan hadn't allowed him to go to the gym, the least he could do was join him in the water.

"Hey." Liu Qingge frowned down at Shen Yuan once he hauled his dripping form from the ocean. He let his ponytail swing over Shen Yuan's body and drip drop after drop of salt water onto him.

Shen Yuan returned Liu Qingge's scowl with his own. "You're dripping on me."

"Come and swim."

“I don’t want to,” Shen Yuan said.

“Too bad.” And Liu Qingge reached down to scoop Shen Yuan into his arms, tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of grain. His waist, warm from the sun, bent over Liu Qingge’s shoulder and his legs flailed and kicked. Even his hands clenched into fists and pounded Liu Qingge’s back, but when he squealed to be let down, Liu Qingge could tell he didn’t mean it. The smile on his lips betrayed him.

Shen Yuan’s body was warm and squirmy, but it didn’t stay that way for long. Once Liu Qingge had waded in to his thighs, he threw Shen Yuan into the ocean as far as his strength would allow.

Shen Yuan flew through the air with a shriek that was eventually muffled by the water as his head ducked under.

He emerged from the waves with a watery smile, bangs splattered across his forehead. “I’ll get you for that, you bastard!” He sloshed towards Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge was reminded of their time on the basketball court, when they chased each other around like wild animals until his spine ended up pressed against the chain-link fence while Shen Yuan pressed his soft mouth to Liu Qingge’s. Would that happen again?

Regardless of how badly he wanted to be kissed by Shen Yuan, Liu Qingge evaded, ducking under the water to latch onto Shen Yuan’s vulnerable ankles. Even under the water he could hear Shen Yuan’s screech.

Shen Yuan was yanked into the water, and Liu Qingge watched his scrawny limbs flail once he was submerged.

But Liu Qingge helped him out from under the water, gripping him close by his shoulders as he rubbed at his eyes. In that brief moment where Shen Yuan was preoccupied with scrubbing away the salty burn, Liu Qingge tenderly brushed the sopping wet bangs from his forehead.

Tenderly wasn’t often used to describe someone like Liu Qingge. He was quite the opposite. But with Shen Yuan’s bare chest pressed against his own and the remnants of a smile dancing across his features, he had to be as careful as he could.

Shen Yuan swallowed, growing pink from the sun or Liu Qingge’s nearness, he couldn’t tell. All he knew was that Shen Yuan fit perfectly in his arms. Their heartbeats pounded erratically; Shen Yuan’s like a fluttering bird, Liu Qingge’s as graceful as a demon monster thundering down a mountain.

Shen Yuan appeared to be on the verge of saying something but decided against it. Instead, he took advantage of Liu Qingge’s spacey stare and pushed him under the water.

By the time Liu Qingge came up, sputtering, Shen Yuan was sloshing away, looking over his shoulders with an uncertain laugh.

Yes, this was easier. It was easier to play and chase Shen Yuan than to yearn for something a little bit more. He'd continue to play this game.

Liu Qingge caught up to Shen Yuan in no time. He was wheezing and panting trying to put some distance between them, but Liu Qingge came up swiftly behind, wrapping his arms around Shen Yuan's waist in a tight embrace. He loved the pursual of these kinds of games, but now that his pecs were pressing against Shen Yuan's trembling shoulder blades, he realized he didn't know what to do.

Shen Yuan looked over his shoulder. Liu Qingge's eyes were drawn to the pink column of his neck, the water sliding down it in such an alluring manner that one drop alone could have been his oasis in a desert.

He lurched away, releasing Shen Yuan. His arms trembled with the loss of that warmth against them.

Liu Qingge didn't go back into the water after that.

He perched himself on the tiniest corner of Shen Yuan's towel while Shen Yuan let the sun dry his body.

"I'm hungry," Shen Yuan finally grumbled, throat scratchy with salt water. He, regrettably, tugged his shirt over his head and balled up his sandy towel before tucking it under his armpit.

He led them to a restaurant right along the beach. It was already full of people who must've been attending the competition. That, or it was just a popular location for tourists. Liu Qingge bristled at the crowds before him, but Shen Yuan just latched his sweaty palm around his wrist and dragged him inside.

Comforting spices and aromas assaulted Liu Qingge's nostrils. His own stomach gurgled in hunger, but he couldn't eat anything before the weigh in. He'd have to resort to simply watching Shen Yuan eat. That alone sounded equally, if not more painful, than fasting.

But they sat at a table tucked into a corner anyway. The moment the server whisked past them, Shen Yuan flagged them down and rattled off four dishes to eat.

They waited without speaking, Shen Yuan's knee bouncing frantically under the table, shaking it and the cutlery until it clanked against each other, until Liu Qingge finally snipped "can you *stop* ," and silence had returned. He felt a little awful for his short fuse, but Shen Yuan had just rolled his eyes and emphasized how excited he was for some fresh seafood.

Liu Qingge had to admit, when the dishes arrived, it smelled absolutely divine. He clenched his hands into fists on his thighs and internally smacked himself for complying with these stupid fighting rules. On Bai Zhan Peak, it was *encouraged* to eat as much as you pleased like barbarians so you would be strong and energized for the fights ahead. He wanted to risk it all for the steaming lobster and crab and crispy rice decorating the table.

Shen Yuan's eyes glowed with delight. He wasted no time heaping a spoonful of crab meat and rice onto his plate, along with a hefty sampling of the other dishes he'd ordered.

Liu Qingge leaned back in his chair, just watching for now. His face relaxed when that first bite went past Shen Yuan's lips and he groaned appreciatively.

He shoveled another two spoonfuls into his mouth. "You *have* to try this."

Liu Qingge rolled his eyes. "I can't." He wanted to, truthfully.

"You're *really* missing out." Another dreamy sigh.

He *knew* he was missing out! "Doesn't help that you're rubbing it in my face the whole time," he griped. His eyes followed the varying types of meat being placed on Shen Yuan's next scoop of rice. He gently draped a few blanched and seasoned vegetables on top.

Shen Yuan opened his alluring mouth, that warm tongue making an appearance to accept the next spoonful of food. He chewed and swallowed, the lump sliding down his throat.

It was too much. "Fine," he grunted. "One bite."

Liu Qingge's chest warmed when Shen Yuan piled a spoon high of rice, meat, and vegetables. He took immense care layering everything into the perfect bite, adjusting it just so with his chopsticks until the tower was steady. Liu Qingge wasn't even sure he could fit the whole thing into his mouth.

"Open up~" Shen Yuan cooed, like Liu Qingge was a child.

He grimaced, but his cheeks grew hot. Shen Yuan leaned over the table, his shirt dipping low to reveal a hint of his chest.

Liu Qingge complied with a deep frown, mouth opening just the tiniest amount to accept Shen Yuan's offering. He fortunately managed to not make a fool of himself and got everything in one go, his cheeks puffing with the weight of the food now filling his mouth.

His scowl lessened instantly. The food was *incredible* . Rich, smoky flavours danced across his tongue, the crunch of the browned rice and juice spilling from the soft meat bursting into and sliding down his throat in perfect harmony.

He nearly missed Shen Yuan's face-splitting grin at his reaction. That alone filled him more than the food he was swallowing.

How vile.

He longed for another bite, but that mountain of food Shen Yuan prepared for him alone was probably enough for him to barely make weight. He had been careful these past few days and exercising more frequently than usual, but he knew he had to resist.

With the bite of food and unexpected happiness filling his stomach, Liu Qingge watched Shen Yuan devour everything else with surprising ability. The man could eat anything.

He sat back with a groan that resembled an elderly gentleman, rubbing his belly.

A smudge of sauce and a grain of rice stuck to the corner of his lips, reddened from the spicy sauce.

Without thinking, before Liu Qingge could muster up any self-control, his body leaned over the table to brush his thumb across Shen Yuan's cheek.

The skin, warmed from the sun, was soft under his thumb, and he dragged it carefully across the corner of his mouth, tracing the line of his bottom lip. The bottom lip that Liu Qingge himself had tasted last night, the bottom lip he had felt against his own chin, the bottom lip that had parted to sigh Liu Qingge's name not too long ago.

A gentle gasp hitched from Shen Yuan's throat. His eyes, once closed and content from the meal, shot open in surprise and stayed there, even after Liu Qingge returned to his seat. The distance between his top and bottom lashes grew ever wider when, unthinking still, Liu Qingge's tongue darted out to savour the flavours caught on his thumb.

At the sunburn that had managed to crawl its way up Shen Yuan's entire face, Liu Qingge's own body reacted to his embarrassing lack of control.

He shifted in his seat; coughed once into his fist. "Let's just pay and get out of here," he grumbled, determined not to meet Shen Yuan's eyes again.

Shen Yuan might have muttered something under his breath, but Liu Qingge refused to pay close enough attention to catch it. He waved over the server and forked over an absurd amount of money with shaky hands.

They walked back to the hotel with a wide six feet of space between them.

There, Shen Yuan said nothing as his legs dangled from the edge of the bed, swinging back and forth.

Liu Qingge didn't know what to say either. *Sorry for thumbing your lip and then sucking off the sauce that remained in hopes I would taste your essence* ? No, that was bad. He was stupid with words but smart enough to know that that wouldn't be the right thing to say.

Well, it was no matter. It was probably nothing anyways. Liu Qingge had other things on his mind, like the punching bag that was waiting for him at the gym. A grin tugged on his lips. He couldn't *wait* to get his fists on that.

He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and grunted out a goodbye before abandoning Shen Yuan for the mats.

There was nothing he needed more than to punch out his bubbling feelings that were threatening to explode.

Chapter End Notes

shen yuan: omg the beach yay

liu qingge: dickdickdickdickdickdickdi--

side note: i really do agree with points people make about lqg being ace but just :D not in this fic he ain't :D

Chapter 28: Bonus: The Song of CumLiu

Chapter Notes

this.....was painful to write

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All these muscles must be just for show…” Mr. Cucumber traces the curves of Liu Qingge’s ribs, scraping his fingernails across the skin.

Liu Qingge shudders helplessly, trapped in the tight embrace of silky red ropes around his wrists. They’re pinned above his head, fastened securely to the bed frame. He’s left at Mr. Cucumber’s mercy.

While Liu Qingge isn’t used to being in such a predicament, he can’t stop the desperate whimpers from tumbling from his parted lips.

Those lips catch Mr. Cucumber’s eye and he leans down to take them in his own. His tongue pushes inside, dominating Liu Qingge’s mouth while his fingers idly twist the subdued Peak Lord’s exposed nipples. The buds turn a luscious pink under Mr. Cucumber’s assault, each roll of his fingertips only making Liu Qingge’s pillar twitch.

“C-cucumber-gege…please…” Liu Qingge pants. He ruts his hips frantically into the air, searching for relief.

Mr. Cucumber merely laughs at Liu Qingge’s torment. “If you were really so strong, you would have escaped already.”

Liu Qingge can do nothing but turn his head to the side, cheek pressing against the sheets. His embarrassment manifests as a delicate blush on his cheeks, glistening tears clinging to his long eyelashes. His hair is spilled out underneath him, as pretty as a woman’s, and with his wet, pink lips parted in shyness, he plays the part of an ashamed maiden beautifully.

Mr. Cucumber smiles at the sight. Liu Qingge is extraordinarily pretty, all trussed up below him, his muscles flexing and straining as he tries to squirm away.

Shen Yuan was just as appalled as the man beside him. What the fuck was this shit?! While a part of him thought it a little funny that Liu Qingge was the bottom in this instance, he was more so worried for Airplane’s future.

While dealing with his newfound boyfriend, Shen Yuan found he had less time for web novels. He still found a way, even if it meant scrolling on his phone for a few hours while Liu Qingge slept and after he had recovered from being fucked in the ass. If he were particularly brave, he would set an alarm for after Liu Qingge had gone to the gym. From there he would

read until Liu Qingge returned more than two hours later, indulging in commenting critiques and bitching on all the forums.

Then, one morning (Shen Yuan thought 'morning' was subjective, it was, in fact, the early afternoon), while he was in the middle of a heated debate about an infamous author's lack of character nuance, he received an email notification on his phone.

It was titled: *For My Favourite Fan!!!*

Shen Yuan was instantly skeptical. He opened it right away.

Hey Cucumber-bro! The email read. Shen Yuan began to seethe.

I stumbled across this photo of you and Liu Qingge on the internet, teehee! Who the fuck said "teehee"? But Shen Yuan looked at the photo attached. It was taken at the MMA competition. Shen Yuan recognized the moment as when Liu Qingge had won his semifinals, the two midway through pulling back from a tight embrace Shen Yuan still remembered in his body. They were staring at each other, boyish grins splitting their faces in two.

Shen Yuan's cheeks warmed. The photo felt personal and like an invasion of privacy, but he had never seen it before. It was nice to have a copy. He saved it to his phone before continuing to read.

You two just seem so cute together :P So I wrote a short little fanfiction about you guys . Best of luck with your boyfie, Cucumber-bro!!!!!

And that's how they ended up here, Liu Qingge red-faced in anger and humiliation, Shen Yuan shaking in disbelief.

What…a horrible thing to write!

Some way down, the scene continued.

A tear finally slips from Liu Qingge's dewy eyes as Mr. Cucumber thrusts his rigid pillar into that tight channel. A shaky gasp escapes his lips when Mr. Cucumber wraps his hands around the restrained Peak Lord's slim waist before rolling his hips to push his stiff cock in further.

Liu Qingge's own flushed cock jerks with each movement. At first, he tries to resist, but soon, with each pass of Mr. Cucumber's flared head against his prostate, Liu Qingge's eyes glaze over.

He decides he doesn't want to resist any longer. The sensations of being fucked are too good, and Mr. Cucumber's fingers twisting his defenseless nipples only cause him to fall deeper into this hazy state.

After enduring this torment for some time, his thighs begin to tremble and quake from overstimulation.

But Mr. Cucumber feels no need to stop.

“C-Cucumber-gege—” Liu Qingge tries again.

“Gege?!” Liu Qingge’s rage crashed over Shen Yuan like a wave. His teeth clenched together, causing a vein to pop in his jaw. The definition would usually draw Shen Yuan’s attention, and if he were more aware of his own sexuality, he would dare to press a kiss to that ninety-degree angle of his jaw.

But he wasn’t feeling brave, and Liu Qingge was likely not in the mood for affection. Shen Yuan could see another trip to the gym in Liu Qingge’s future.

Gege was somewhat of a special term between them, something Shen Yuan himself only used when he was lost in the sauce. He rarely, if not never, used it outside of sex. So seeing it used to carelessly in this shit fanfiction from Airplane made Shen Yuan’s stomach turn sour.

“What’s the matter, pet?” Mr. Cucumber asks, a dangerous smirk tilting his lips.

“*PET* ?!” Liu Qingge roared.

Shen Yuan ignored that.

“Do you want more of Daddy’s cock?” Mr. Cucumber slides out, teasing the tip along Liu Qingge’s twitching hole.

Liu Qingge shifts uncomfortably at the loss of feeling so deliciously full, whining pathetically. “P-please…”

Mr. Cucumber laughs. He traces his fingernail along a vein that runs on the underside of Liu Qingge’s neglected cock, eliciting a shudder. “Use your words, sweetheart. What do you want this benevolent one to do?”

A stream of drool drips from Liu Qingge’s lolling tongue, trailing down his cheek. His eyelids, half-closed with pleasure, flutter like the wings of butterflies. Lost in pleasure, he’s so different from his brutish self. Only Mr. Cucumber has the ability to tame this beast with his heavy cock.

“Please,” Liu Qingge says again, goosebumps rising along his body, “please, please let this humble one go…”

Mr. Cucumber sighs, pushing his tip into the relaxed entrance. He hums at the way Liu Qingge clenches around him. “But this master hasn’t yet cum…Don’t you want to have the honour of making me finish with your tight cunt?”

Shen Yuan was truly at a loss for words. He could vomit blood. His finger on the mouse had frozen and he could scroll no further. What other horrors lay ahead?

He eyed the word counter at the bottom of the page. It exceeded 10,000. 10,000 words and then some, each more painful than the last.

He shot a glance at Liu Qingge. His eyebrows were the lowest he had ever seen them, his body comically tense. In any other situation he would have to bite back a laugh at the sight of

Liu Qingge so incredibly perturbed, but Shen Yuan felt the exact same. Where Liu Qingge was red with rage, Shen Yuan was ghostly pale in terror.

But, like a car accident, Shen Yuan couldn't bring himself to tear away just yet.

It persists for some time, Liu Qingge boneless and weak from being so thoroughly fucked. Mr. Cucumber never ceases. His orgasm shoots into Liu Qingge's loosened channel, but his cock never deflates. After every release, he continues to pummel into the cockslut beneath him until Liu Qingge knows nothing but the numbness in his waist and the weak tremors of his own climaxes.

Mr. Cucumber continues to use his hole long into the night, until the sunlight begins to shine through the curtains. Liu Qingge, drenched in sweat and his watery loads can do nothing but spread his legs obediently for his master.

Okay that was enough. *More* than enough.

How demented was Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky?! Even sex god Luo Binghe would be threatened by this lack of refractory period! What did Airplane mean his cock never deflated? It was Liu Qingge who could go three rounds in one night, leaving Shen Yuan a pile of battered and bruised goo!

"*Put it away*." Liu Qingge hissed in Shen Yuan's ear.

Shen Yuan instantly complied. If he kept the document open a moment longer, who knew what Liu Qingge would do? He also couldn't bear to see it any longer. It was if the words had burned themselves on the inside of his eyelids, like a horror novel he'd rather forget.

Maybe he would buy a new desktop. Something not tainted with badly written porn about him and his gay roommate.

Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan sat in tense silence for an indeterminable amount of time. How did they recover from these atrocities?

Shen Yuan yearned to crack his knuckles and write a passionate response. Something that rivaled those 10,000+ words in detail and description of all the horrible things he would do to Airplane. Liu Qingge could take that wall-of-muscle bodyguard and Shen Yuan would take a crowbar to Airplane's knees and shins and unmentionables until he was nothing more than a pile of pulp.

A little graphic, but Airplane deserved it.

Cold sweat ran down the back of his neck.

"Shen Yuan." Liu Qingge said, barely restraining himself from bursting with rage. "I don't —" He couldn't speak anymore.

Shen Yuan understood what he was trying to say. He had *experienced* what he was trying to say. "O-of course."

It was as if the fanfiction Airplane had written about them to bring them closer together was the very thing that made them exceptionally uncomfortable now.

Shen Yuan hated every word about that fanfiction. But Airplane had a talent in getting Shen Yuan to remember the faces Liu Qingge made as he fucked him; the way his dark eyebrows furrowed in concentration, the way his abdomen flexed with each thrust, the low grunts and moans when he finally came inside of Shen Yuan, his exhausted, lazy kisses along Shen Yuan's pale throat.

And, against his will, a tiny part of him wondered how Liu Qingge would feel around him.

Okay, no, that was it. If he considered it any longer, he would launch himself out the window. It was just so *wrong*.

Just as Shen Yuan had predicted, Liu Qingge muttered: "I'm going to the gym." He grabbed his pre-packed duffel bag and stomped off.

And not too long after that fateful day, Shen Yuan received a thick envelope in the mail. It was littered with additional charges to his credit card stating that the person using the gym membership had shredded four punching bags in one go and had snapped more than half of the practice kendo swords in the span of an hour.

A justified response, Shen Yuan thought.

Chapter End Notes

raise your hand if you would read the full 10,000+ word version and the other atrocities it includes

Chapter 29: Bonus: The Visitor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something was off.

The instant Liu Qingge's hand rested on the knob to the apartment he could sense something was different than before. Steeling himself, he punched in the door code and entered. He didn't bother to take off his shoes, just quietly reached for Cheng Luan in the closet (Cheng Luan reduced to living life in a closet. How pathetic).

There was a different scent in the apartment, for one, and a pair of foreign shoes. The shoes were mostly white with pink laces and accents. He didn't know anyone who wore these.

Setting his duffel bag lightly on the ground, Liu Qingge surveyed the space. Shen Yuan wasn't here; he said he had some errand to run and would be back late. Liu Qingge had already spent longer in the gym than usual. He didn't like coming back home when Shen Yuan wasn't there to greet him.

The kitchen and living room were empty. There was a trail of items not belonging to the two of them. Liu Qingge eyed the stack of books on the corner of the kitchen island. If there wasn't a potential threat in the apartment, he'd look at them closer. But for now, he had to neutralize the threat.

Just then, a crash in the bedroom.

Maybe Shen Yuan *was* here. Maybe he was in danger.

Panic seeping into Liu Qingge's chest, he kicked the bedroom door open.

Someone screamed.

Not Shen Yuan, but a girl.

"For *fuck's sake*, you *scared* me!" She wheezed, batting the tip of Cheng Luan away from her face. "Who do you think you are, waving a glorified tomato slicer around?!"

Liu Qingge dropped Cheng Luan to his side, more offended that she called him a tomato slicer than threatened by her lack of fright. This was a *sophisticated* weapon and she nudged it away just like that! Who was this cold-blooded person?

The woman continued to mutter profanities under her breath and give Liu Qingge a nasty glare. She was pretty, in a…woman sort of way. Liu Qingge wasn't much into women to begin with, but her hair looked soft and her eyes looked…familiar, somehow. Her skirt and top were so pink it almost hurt to look at.

He shook his head to gain some sense. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?” This intruder didn’t seem dangerous, but he couldn’t be too sure. Besides, rooting around in the bedroom was extremely suspicious.

She banged the computer desk drawer shut with her hip. A slow smile crept up her cheeks. “I get it, now.”

What does she get? Why was she speaking in riddles? Liu Qingge hated these kinds of games.

“You’re the boyfriend.”

The what?! His ears burned with embarrassment.

“You’re the reason my stupid brother hasn’t come home lately.” She cocked her hip and crossed her arms.

Brother?

Right. Shen Yuan had mentioned a sister at one point. This must have been her, but why was she here in the first place? Why hadn’t Shen Yuan said anything?

She was going through her own epiphanies. “Wait, you’re *cute,* how did A-Yuan bag a hunk like you?”

Now the back of his neck flushed pink. He felt it. “I-I’m not his—we’re not—” In fact, he *was* his, and they *were*. They’d been dating for some time now, as juvenile and humiliating that word felt. He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud. Even the thought of holding hands with Shen Yuan was too embarrassing to admit.

The girl started to giggle, clapping her hands. “Finally, finally, finally!” Before Liu Qingge could react, she was wrapping her arms tight around his waist. “It was so *aggravating* watching him deny his own sexuality!”

Liu Qingge froze in shock, breath stuttering in his chest before attempting to shove her away. She clung onto him like a bush burr, impossible to remove without getting stuck somewhere else. He wanted to run and hide. Meeting new people or being with people in general was never his strong suit, and now he was thrust into meeting his boyfriend’s sister with no warning? This was…one of his worst nightmares!

“Tell me *everything*,” she squealed, pushing Liu Qingge to sit on the bed. How was this girl so strong? “How did my chronically-online, disgusting brother end up with a guy like *you?* Just look at these muscles!” She squeezed his bicep for good measure.

Getting poked and prodded was one thing, but slandering Shen Yuan was something he couldn’t stand for. “Shen Yuan is not *disgusting*,” he huffed. Sure, the man could sometimes be a bit of a slob, and liked to sleep in until noon or later, and wasn’t very good at washing dishes, and left cups of half-started drinks lying around, and forgot to fold his clothes after

the laundry was done, but he wasn't in any means *disgusting*. Only Liu Qingge could critique him like this.

The girl rolled her eyes but was still smiling. "Okay, okay, whatever. How did you two meet?!" Her wide eyes focused unblinkingly on Liu Qingge's face. Now that he got a closer look, the two really did have a similar slope to their noses.

What does he say, Shen Yuan saved him from oncoming traffic and then Liu Qingge threatened him into caring for him while he recovered from qi deviation even though there was no such thing as qi here anyways? It seemed a bit far-fetched.

So he bit his tongue and said nothing.

"Oooh, so secretive! Don't worry, I'll winkle it out of A-Yuan. He'll squeal like a pig in no time." Her dark hair flopped over her shoulder as she looked at him. "You're *so* dreamy…"

What was Liu Qingge supposed to say to that? The praise made him deeply uncomfortable.

"I'm Shen Yunxi, by the way, but you can just call me *meimei*!"

Liu Qingge recoiled. Such an affectionate term so early after meeting? Was all of Shen Yuan's family like this? He could only wish Shen Yuan would return home soon and he could kick his sister out so Liu Qingge wouldn't be tormented by her endless questions.

"Is my brother treating you well?" She cooed.

Flashes of Shen Yuan's reddened cheeks and wet lips appeared in Liu Qingge's brain before he could even attempt to stop them. Yes, he was being treated *very* well. He didn't dare bring this up in front of Shen Yuan's sister, so he opted to grunt noncommittally instead.

Shen Yunxi rolled her eyes, really displaying her similarity to her brother. "Well, aren't you just a chatterbox?"

He didn't appreciate the slight. He could be perfectly chatty when he wanted to be. To prove his point, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Shen Yunxi sniffed. "Okay, pretty boy, I'll answer your questions if you answer mine." He didn't like the sound of that. "I'm here because Yuan-gege borrowed my books nearly a year ago and still hasn't returned them! I've been dying to read *The Capturing and Enslavement of the Demure Soldier Boy* again."

The…what?

"*And*, he still has volumes fifteen to thirty-six of *My Robot Butler is Actually my Fated Alpha!?* that I promised I would lend to one of my other friends."

Liu Qingge had never heard of such books before. Were those the ones that were on the kitchen island? Shen Yuan had never read them in his presence. Maybe…because he didn't want Liu Qingge to see them? Now he needed to know. "Where are these books?" He demanded.

“Ah, ah,” Shen Yunxi tutted, “it’s my turn to ask a question now. What’s the name of my brother’s mysterious boyfriend?”

He *wished* she would stop calling him that. He huffed. “Liu Qingge. Can I see the books?” He asked again.

“Not your turn yet. How long have you been seeing my brother, Qingge-gege?”

Liu Qingge blanched. Shen Yuan only called him that when they were… It didn’t matter when. What mattered was this girl becoming too informal too quickly. It made Liu Qingge violently uncomfortable. *Seeing?* It’s been a few months. But *dating*? This was absurd. Unnecessary. Degrading. “…Just for a bit.”

Shen Yunxi sent a rapid message through her phone. It was faster than even Shen Yuan could type, and he was a madman when it came to these sorts of things. “No matter. I told Yuan-ge to hurry the fuck up and get his crusty ass over here to I can interrogate you two together.”

There was something he could agree on. Every second longer Shen Yunxi stayed, more and more sweat gathered at Liu Qingge’s temples. There was something about her that was so unnerving. Like she could see right through him.

Just then, blessedly, the door clicked open.

Both Shen Yunxi and Liu Qingge leapt to their feet, a battle of who would be the first to greet Shen Yuan.

Shen Yunxi emerged victorious, mostly because Liu Qingge wasn’t sure how Shen Yuan would react if he saw him trample his sister to the ground. He was a strong man, after all.

“Yuan-gege~” Shen Yunxi crooned with that sticky sweet voice. From behind her, Liu Qingge could practically see her long eyelashes batting.

Shen Yuan was a wreck. His chest was heaving to try and catch his breath, hair all mussed and glasses askew. The bags of groceries in his hands tumbled to the ground as he sent a panicked glance Liu Qingge’s way that Liu Qingge returned with his own alarm.

“Come, come, dear brother, you have *so* much to tell me!” Shen Yunxi guided a stiff Shen Yuan to the living room couch and shoved him down. All he could do was obey.

Liu Qingge took a seat beside him, but not too close. Even though she already knew they were dating. And boyfriends. And probably did other stuff too that dating boyfriends do. Liu Qingge shuddered.

Shen Yunxi pulled up a dining room chair and sat herself down, facing the guilty pair. If Liu Qingge knew her better, he would have known that the gears were turning and cranking in her head, making her giddy with glee.

They were effectively interrogated, the questions tumbling from Shen Yunxi’s mouth getting increasingly more daring and personal. *Uncomfortably* personal.

No one would ever think to ask such a question so brazenly in Liu Qingge's time, so hearing Shen Yuan's delicate little sister ask about *how* and *to what extent* they dual cultivated made him twitch with the urge to whip out Cheng Luan and slice his own throat. Put him out of this misery.

Shen Yuan was in no better condition. He was hunched in on himself, cheeks as red as ripened apples, fingers twisting anxiously around themself. With each question, he refused to look at Liu Qingge as if making eye contact would reveal something forbidden.

What *hadn't* been winkled out of them at this point?

Shen Yunxi's grin was malicious and calculating. Of all the nefarious demons Liu Qingge had met in his immortal lifetime, Shen Yuan's sister was the worst.

She stopped her onslaught after some time, satisfied with causing such a tangible sense of embarrassment now thick between the boyfriends. After all was revealed, her smile turned sweet, gentle.

"Well, Yuan-ge, because I'm feeling so generous and because you've amused me, I'll let you keep the books a bit longer." She stood from her chair, brushing imaginary dust from her frilly skirt. "I also left some of the other volumes you requested on the island." She slung her purse over her shoulder and slid her shoes on her feet.

"Oh, and Qingge-gege?" Those sharp eyes locked onto him.

He swallowed, then grunted.

"Maybe you should take a look at those books Yuan-ge reads. You might get some ideas." She left with a teasing wink and high-pitched cackle.

Creative profanities spilled from Shen Yuan's lips like a dam burst open, but the door had already closed. "I'm gonna *kill* her," he wheezed. He instantly whipped out his phone and sent numerous pictures of an uncouth hand gesture to his sister.

The books crossed his mind again. Curiosity was eating away at him, second by second. He spotted a stack on the kitchen island; something Shen Yunxi had left behind.

While Shen Yuan continued to rage, and fume, and punch a pillow on the couch with his scrawny arms, Liu Qingge surveyed the covers.

The books were decorated with images of two men. One was massive: huge, beefy shoulders with a tight top that must have burst open with the slightest movement contrasted with the brightest grin Liu Qingge had ever seen on a person. Or a *likeness* of a person. The second person in the photo was shorter, angrier, with a pointed, equally-handsome face and black eyebrows drawn low over his eyes. The image was rather harmless.

Then he eyed the title.

In a bubbly, rounded font, it read: *Mr. CEO is a Dragon Shifter Who Wants to Dominate Me!?*

Liu Qingge was…speechless. Surely dominate couldn't mean… He dared to flip it open.

Liu Qingge immediately wished he hadn't. The images inside were *obscene*. No, obscene couldn't even begin to describe the horrors he witnessed with his own two eyes. Being forced to look at that brat Luo Binghe for a whole, uninterrupted day would be better—well, okay, maybe not, but this was *very* bad.

The book was slammed shut before his poor mind could be tainted further. Were all the books like this? A few books down the stack was another, mysteriously titled *Impregnated by the Prince of the Underworld!* and again featuring…two men. One was tall and large, as before, with inky black hair spilling over his shoulders. Two sharp horns protruded from his head, and a thick, pointy tongue licked at the corner of his mouth. He was embracing a small… visibly pregnant man.

This was too much.

"Don't look at those!" Shen Yuan squealed, realizing Liu Qingge's silence. But it was too late. He had been exposed to the horrors of Shen Yuan's pastimes. He scooped the novels into his arms and dumped them somewhere, hopefully hidden, in the bedroom before returning.

"You…" Liu Qingge started.

Shen Yuan winced, bracing for impact.

"…like these sorts of things." It wasn't even a question, more of a harsh judgement. His mouth twisted into a grimace. Those images stayed with him. The flash of a monster pillar, ropes and ribbons used for things ropes and ribbons should not be used for, the close-ups of a couple's most intimate moment. He shook his head as if to shake the traumatic pictures right out of his ears.

Shen Yuan blanched. "No, *no* ! I only read them to make fun of them, I swear!"

Liu Qingge shuddered. He didn't want to talk about these things anymore. The longer they maintained this conversation, the more uncomfortable he became. "Just," he grumbled, "don't read them around me."

Shen Yuan's shoulders relaxed and Liu Qingge felt a little, teeny tiny bad for his earlier aggressive judgement. But it was very weird. He flumped onto the couch, forearms covering his eyes. "Shen Yunxi is a pest," he groaned.

Liu Qingge couldn't help but agree, but he noticed the way Shen Yuan's tone towards his sister wasn't hateful, just a little weary. He thought of his own sister, chest suddenly tight with the realization he may never see her again.

"Is your sister such a brat, too?"

Mingyan. What was she doing now? Had time stopped, or did it continue without Liu Qingge's presence? She was always somewhat independent, even as a child. She never leaned on him or anyone else, rarely asking for help. All that aside, she was a little sister at the end

of the day, and the two definitely had their fair share of fights (mostly initiated by Liu Qingge), and she did manage to stick her nose in things it didn't belong. She did bust open the door to his room on Bai Zhan Peak when she wanted to interrogate him about something or annoy him.

And there was something about Shen Yunxi's and Liu Mingyan's personalities that caused something to flicker alight in the back of his mind. Before he could pinpoint it, the idea was gone.

But Mingyan was smart and quiet and mature. People thought she was pretty, and she was okay, he guessed, nothing especially extraordinary about her, but as her brother he was naturally inclined to find things wrong with her.

Liu Qingge joined Shen Yuan on the couch. "No. She's perfect." He snorted.

Shen Yuan was quiet. "Yeah, she kinda is, isn't she?"

Something flared in Liu Qingge's gut. "Do you like Liu Mingyan?" He accused. *Everyone* liked his sister. He wasn't jealous of people liking her, of course not, but there was some sort of anxiety that crawled into his throat at the idea of Shen Yuan eyeing his sister.

Shen Yuan sighed. "Who *doesn't* like Liu Mingyan?" Even the way he said her name sounded affectionate.

Liu Qingge stared at his knees. Oh. If he had had the sense to get out of his own insecurities, he would have realized that just like Luo Binghe, Liu Mingyan wasn't even here to tempt Shen Yuan.

"*Oh my god, Liu Qingge*." Shen Yuan's hand came to slap Liu Qingge's arm. "I'm not going to date your fucking sister."

Hope blossomed, foolishly. He finally met Shen Yuan's eyes.

"You're—" he coughed into his fist. Then pushed up his glasses with his knuckle. Then coughed again. His eyes darted around the room as if looking for escape. "…you're my favourite Liu."

Liu Qingge watched the red wash over his boyfriend like a wave. It was incredibly endearing. His words went straight to Liu Qingge's cock. *You're my favourite Liu.* He adjusted himself. "I better be," he grumbled, masking the happiness he felt.

A moment of silence.

"For fuck's sake, are you hard?"

"Shut up."

But at the sound of Shen Yuan's laughter, Liu Qingge couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from twitching into a smile.

Chapter End Notes

i had WAY too much fun coming up with these manga titles dklgjsl my favourite pastime, tbh

Chapter 30: Bonus: What the Heart Wants Most

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little different than the others! Enjoy :)) J hates this one lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liu Qingge was mourned.

It was strange, his disciples firstly thinking *thank god*, their shizun had slept in late or gone away on little notice so they were free to laze about and pick fights with each other, but then that initial joy transformed into a tiny bud of worry.

Okay, it was kind of odd that he hadn't alerted them, or that even his head disciple, Yang Yixuan, had no clue where he went.

No one dared approach his house. Going inside was strictly forbidden, unless one hated their life and wanted to end it prematurely.

Finally, after a full day and night of fretting, Yang Yixuan was pressured into knocking on Liu Qingge's door.

No answer.

Sweat beading at Liu Qingge's disciples' temples, they wrung their hands and dared to peek through the windows. Blocked by curtains, they got no further.

Until they insisted Yang Yixuan go to Qing Jing and plead for Shen Qingqiu's help. Maybe he'd know something! Of course, it meant dealing with his aggravating husband who seemed to have a personal vendetta against everyone who set foot on Bai Zhan Peak, but if their shizun's life was in danger, they'd do anything!

And so that's how Shen Qingqiu was rescued from a very touchy Luo Binghe. Bai Zhan saved his poor, tender ass yet again!

He dutifully followed the head disciple, complaining husband in tow. Luo Binghe was usually forbidden to be on Bai Zhan Peak, but if the matter truly were so dire, maybe everyone would let it slide just this once.

When they arrived, Bai Zhan truly was in a state of distress.

The disciples, though usually alone when Liu Qingge was away, were incredibly lost, floundering about like fish out of water. Upon seeing some semblance of authority, no matter how much they disliked him and Luo Binghe, they flocked to Shen Qingqiu's side.

They babbled and whined like children, demanding Shen Qingqiu provide details.

I don't know anything more than you! he thought, but just pursed his lips and continued on the path to Liu Qingge's residence.

He rapped gently on the door. "Liu-shidi," he called. The disciples hovered around Shen Qingqiu, nearly shoving him into the wall. "Would you *back up*."

They backed up.

One more knock, and no response.

"This master will check," he instructed Liu Qingge's students. When he opened the door, the disciples all leaned in for a peek, but Luo Binghe bodily shoved himself in and slammed the door shut behind him.

Shen Qingqiu stopped in his tracks once inside. His heart lurched in his chest at the sight.

Liu Qingge, ghostly pale, parted lips tinged blue with death.

A wave of ice washed over Shen Qingqiu's body. He could hardly comprehend it.

Approaching closer only confirmed his concerns. Regardless, he still tried. "Liu-shidi…"

Nothing, as expected.

The folded fan trembled in his hands. When he looked down at them, he realized the fan hadn't possessed a mind of its own; he was shaking.

Why was he shaking so much? What was wrong with him? He couldn't control the tremoring of his body no matter how hard he tried. Bile bubbled in the back of his throat. He couldn't see in front of him. Why couldn't he see anything?

What was that sound? Someone was gasping for breath as if they were drowning, great, big gulps of air that didn't sit in the lungs. Who was having such a hard time breathing?

"Shizun—" Someone said, far away.

A warm palm pressed down on his quaking shoulder, holding him still. "Shizun," they said again, closer this time, right beside his ear. The puff of hot breath against his neck made him erupt into sweat. But he was still so cold, somehow. Why was it so cold in here?

He turned over his shoulder to see Luo Binghe. Ah. Right. He was here, grounding him. But looking into his black eyes he saw his own reflection. Face drained of all colour, eyebrows trembling and teeth chattering loud enough to give him a headache.

Why couldn't he control himself?

Luo Binghe raised his eyebrows in alarm. Then, he tugged Shen Qingqiu into his chest, stroking his hair with a splayed hand.

Any other time, Shen Qingqiu would reprimand him for such behaviour in public (on Bai Zhan Peak!), but he couldn't find the words. He *wanted* to say something, but could only manage to lean into his steady warmth.

Air found its way back into his lungs. He licked his lips; they were dry, chapped. The headache lessened in pain, but didn't leave.

"Aha…" Shen Qingqiu laughed shakily. "Forgive this master…" For what? He couldn't even say.

Luo Binghe laid a gentle kiss to the top of his head.

"Thank god he's dead," Luo Binghe muttered, just loud enough for Shen Qingqiu to hear.

Shen Qingqiu extracted himself from his grasp and clenched his fan tightly to hit him over the head. "That's no way to talk about your shishu," he scolded. His *deceased* shishu.

Shen Qingqiu still didn't know what had come over him. But he was a little upset. Just a tiny bit! *That* he recognized. Liu Qingge was always a pain in his ass, but he was loyal to a fault and had helped Shen Qingqiu more than he could possibly repay.

He felt as if he lost a close frenemy. A confidant. Luo Binghe's presence suddenly felt disrespectful.

He wanted to cry. Show some respect for this ally he'd lost. If Liu Qingge had known he would die in his sleep, he'd be furious. What a way to go! Not in the heat of battle or war as he so often craved, but laying peacefully in the comfort of his own home.

Shen Qingqiu's gut twisted. Surely this world couldn't be so cruel that it couldn't even grant him this!

But Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but wonder. This type of thing looked awfully familiar. And for Liu Qingge to die just like that in his sleep without any last words? It was extremely out of character!

Shen Qingqiu's eyes darted around the pristine room. Nothing was out of place except… Cheng Luan was missing.

That and…

The blossom!

He was about to open his mouth to say something before snapping it shut.

There was only one person to consult regarding such matters of life and death.

Shang Qinghua appeared not a few moments later from a black whirlpool that swirled out Liu Qingge's door.

It was a true crime scene now.

Mobei-Jun emerged hot on heels. He wasn't so much the King of the Northern Desert anymore, now more of a glorified bodyguard to the An Ding Peak Lord. His arms were crossed over his beefy chest, face etched in a permanent scowl. His gaze followed every twitch and quiver of Shang Qinghua's movements.

Shang Qinghua, seeking freedom from the looming hulk over him, flitted to Shen Qingqiu's side.

His face blanched to a ghostly white when he surveyed Liu Qingge. "He's…dead?!" He squealed, a pile of scrolls and parchments he brought with him for some reason fluttering to the ground.

"Outside," Shen Qingqiu hissed, gripping Airplane's sleeve. Both Luo Binghe and Mobei-Jun moved to accompany them, but Shen Qingqiu waved his fan. "Stay here," he told Binghe, who reluctantly, but obediently, stayed.

Mobei-Jun took a little longer to convince. His eyes danced over Shen Qingqiu. Then judging him as no severe threat to his bookkeeper, he huffed and let them pass.

Once outside, Luo Binghe couldn't resist peeking through the curtains. Shen Qingqiu rolled his eyes but his heart skipped a silly little beat. Mobei-Jun lurked behind him, looking bored. He didn't *have* to come, just must not have been able to bear the idea of his precious Peak Lord going somewhere without his supervision.

How odd. "Mobei-Jun follows you around a great deal."

A rainbow of colours washed over Shang Qinghua's face. "Haha…I don't know why…" But the ultimate splotchy red on his cheeks betrayed him.

Hm. He'd have to interrogate him later. They had more pressing issues at hand.

"How did Liu Qingge die!?" Shang Qinghua suddenly remembered.

Shen Qingqiu frowned. "I'm not entirely sure. Something you may have noticed is that Cheng Luan is gone, but I don't think it was stolen. There's no sign of forced entry."

Shang Qinghua jumped right onto Shen Qingqiu's train of thought. "Was he acting weird? Did he talk to you?"

"Weirder than usual?" Shen Qingqiu scoffed. A spike of guilt shot through him. Making fun of a dead man! That was a new low, even for him. "He came to see me a few days ago," he admitted. There was something almost embarrassing about it, like he was confessing to a crime.

But Shang Qinghua was no one to make accusations considering he still did double-duty for the Demon Realm. It was by the grace of Yue Qingyuan that he was able to remain Peak Lord. And everyone else's own laziness; it's not their fault that Airplane was good at his job, okay!?

Shang Qinghua fumbled for a clean scroll and took a long fountain pen from his pocket. “Oh? What for?” He started to rapidly scribble incomprehensible shorthand across the page. How could he even decipher his own writing?

They were interrupted by Yang Yixuan, having realized the seriousness of the situation, and finally comprehending the loss of his beloved shizun, falling to his knees outside the door. His muscular frame trembled with shaky breaths as he tried to swallow back the tears that threatened to spill from his wide eyes.

Shen Qingqiu was very directly reminded of his own mortality. He’d beaten death once, three times, even, but that wasn’t the case for everyone. Regardless of all the special blossoms and mushrooms and plants and figs that littered this plot-holed world, sometimes death just caught up to you.

Taking some pity, and remembering how he mourned the loss of his own disciple, Shen Qingqiu ushered Yang Yixuan inside. “Go on now, say your goodbyes.”

Yang Yixuan flinched when entering upon seeing two massive demons crowding the space, but turned his attention to Liu Qingge. The door closed, leaving Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu alone once more.

Shen Qingqiu’s fan resumed its flapping in front of his face, hiding his troubled expression. “He came to talk about a flower he found—one of *your* dastardly creations, I might add—and asked me to identify it.”

The scratching of the pen stopped. “Well? What was it?”

Shen Qingqiu opened his mouth to speak, but a flash of lilac whisked past him. Liu Mingyan, the peerless beauty, one who never failed to make Shen Qingqiu’s heart stop in his chest, landed before the door. She bowed politely to Shen Qingqiu and stepped inside.

Yue Qingyuan was close behind. He greeted Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua with a grim smile and followed Liu Mingyan.

Casting each other a wary glance, Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu joined the crowd in Liu Qingge’s house.

Surely his residence had never seen such action before. Nearly every person Liu Qingge had ever known in his life was here, at his bedside, staring blankly at the corpse covered neatly by a thin blanket.

Yue Qingyuan crouched at the side of the bed and lifted Liu Qingge’s limp wrist to his own hand. A pause.

Liu Mingyan’s eyes betrayed nothing. There was not a tremble of her lashes nor a waver of her expression. Her hands, however, clenched into tight fists at her side,

Her voice, as even as it could be in such a situation, asked, “Is he dead?”

Anyone would think it was a cruel question to ask in a tone so uncaring. But those who knew, knew. This was not the indifference of a distant relative, but a brave face put on by a most beloved sister.

Yue Qingyuan, blessedly taking control, reached out as if to place a gentle palm on her shoulder, then thought better of it. "Yes." The word was careful, each sound pronounced evenly on his tongue.

"…" Liu Mingyan's expression flickered with emotion. "…Are you sure?"

Shen Qingqiu's heart seized. He had loved Liu Mingyan, once. "Aiyah," he tsked. "Let's get out, get out."

Everyone hurried to leave the uncomfortable situation. Shen Qingqiu lingered in the doorway for a tender moment, watching Liu Mingyan slowly lower herself to her knees by her brother's bed. Her fingers trembled as she reached for him.

Outside, the Bai Zhan disciples feigned indifference, stomping around and demanding answers, but they were children, at the end of the day, and soon their chins wobbled when they realized there was nothing they could do. One by one they scattered like feral cats finding somewhere quiet to lick their wounds.

Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu continued their discussion, hushed, off to the side.

"It was the—" god, how embarrassing it was to repeat it; Airplane really was a master at coming up with the most outrageous, convoluted names! "—Thousand Year Blossom of the Heart's Eternal Desire."

Seeing that flower stirred uncomfortable truths in his gut. If he were to consume it…what would happen? What was it he truly desired? There was some truth in what Shen Qingqiu had told him; that he had everything he needed right here. But sometimes he really wanted a bag of chips, or not to stumble across one of Airplane-bro's sex-pollen "plot" devices and be fucked to death by Luo Binghe, or to just scroll through social media again. To live his normal life just how he left it: alone in his apartment, typing out lengthy flaming reviews for web novels and eating greasy takeout.

But…he was *living* now. He fought demons and was a badass motherfucker and had a BAMF husband who was also the biggest crybaby he had ever met. He had devoted disciples and actually *liked* them sometimes.

So what was Shen Qingqiu's eternal desire?

He cast a glance at his husband, who was scratching behind his ear like a puppy, those wide, black eyes lingering on him. He tossed him a cheeky grin.

Shen Qingqiu's fan cracked open to hide the trembling at the corners of his lips.

Again, that feeling of guilt returned. Shen Qingqiu's attention was devoted to his husband instead of solving the mystery of Liu Qingge's death.

“So what his heart wanted most was to *die*?” Shang Qinghua hissed.

Shen Qingqiu shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” Liu Qingge was too stubborn to want to die. Even when he was outside death’s door the man would be crawling for a way back to life. “But what could be waiting for him after death?”

The two were silent for a moment.

There was no loved one Shen Qingqiu could think of that Liu Qingge had wanted to meet in the afterlife. He had his sister and his glory in this world. What waited for him elsewhere?

Something in the back of Shen Qingqiu’s mind flared to life. “No…” he breathed.

At the same time, Shang Qinghua whispered, “Do you think…?”

It was the very thing Shen Qingqiu didn’t want to consider. The thing that made the least amount of sense, even as someone who had experienced it.

But the two experts were right here! Who else knew better than them!?

Shang Qinghua gnawed on the tip of his thumb. “What would be for him there? Why would his heart desire that?”

Shen Qingqiu considered this. “Maybe,” he started, warily, “it wasn’t *that* he was seeking, but someone who lived there.”

They didn’t dare mention the modern world in such direct terms with their parasites hovering nearby. If there was anything Shen Qingqiu said that Luo Binghe didn’t know, he would pester and beg until it was explained to him.

“Bro…” Shang Qinghua gasped; eyes as wide as saucers. His gaze danced back and forth between Shen Qingqiu and his husband who was now resorting to picking at clumps of grass by the fistful. For someone so big and strong, he sure did behave like a neglected child.

Shang Qingqhua continued. “You…know why Luo Binghe doesn’t like Liu Qingge, right?”

Shen Qingqiu waved his fan impatiently. “Yes, yes, Bai Zhan Peak disciples bullied him, yadda yadda, we know the drill.”

Shang Qinghua’s lips twitched, like he wasn’t telling Shen Qingqiu everything. “Yeah…that’s definitely it…”

“What’s your problem? Why do you act like I don’t know my own husband?” The fan opened with a sharp crack and furiously fluttered the hair from his face.

He was ignored. “Do you wonder…” he started. The thumb had left its prison in his teeth and he instead swapped it for his bottom lip. “…what if we lived on somehow?”

Shen Qingqiu bristled. “We *died*.”

Shang Qinghua hummed noncommittally. “I suppose. But what if…other versions of us didn’t?”

This was making Shen Qingqiu violently uncomfortable. What would his other self be up to right now? “Are you suggesting alternate timelines?” This was something only seen in CGI-filled action movies!

Upon seeing Shen Qingqiu’s frosty expression, Shang Qinghua shook his head. “Forget it, then.”

As absurd as it was, he didn’t want to completely dismiss the idea. He *did* die and get transmigrated into this shit web novel after all! “No, say what you want.”

“What if he, for example, went to find, hypothetically—”

“Make your point, Airplane.”

“—someone like you?”

Shen Qingqiu scoffed before he could actually register the words.

“A-an alternate version of you!” He explained, faster, but it didn’t clear up any of Shen Qingqiu’s confusion.

Shen Qingqiu’s sneer faltered. This was getting more uncomfortable by the second! “What would he possibly want with me?” He remembered that tight, pinched expression on Liu Qingge’s face when he witnessed Luo Binghe’s embarrassing displays of affection. The two had never liked each other, that much was known, but surely it wasn’t because—he wouldn’t be as vain to think—! His heart thundered in his chest. The winds of the fan increased in strength.

Before he could speak again, at last Mu Qingfang arrived, delayed by a previous engagement. With a solemn air he entered the residence and emerged a few tense minutes later, shaking his head.

Yang Yixuan, who had only just recovered from the initial blow, collapsed once more in tears.

Shen Qingqiu’s chest ached with emotion. Each swallow felt watery and thick in his throat.

Yue Qingyuan said a few words, lost to the shrill ringing in Shen Qingqiu’s ears.

One by one those who wished to went inside to say their goodbyes, right any wrongs. Luo Binghe picked at something in his ear, and if Mobei-Jun had a watch he’d be looking at it pointedly to get Shang Qinghua to hurry the fuck up. It was by miracle alone the demons hadn’t left already to find something more worth their time.

It passed like this until Shen Qingqiu’s own feet stood in front of the door frame.

He paused, unsure.

The knuckles wrapped around his fan became white with tension before he stepped inside, the door sliding shut behind him.

With all the commotion gone, only a gentle breeze rustled Liu Qingge’s curtains and dared to disturb anything in the room. Liu Qingge was all that remained, and Shen Qingqiu was reminded of the smell that lingered; his bar of soap, some sword polish, a musk that could only be described as Liu Qingge’s pure lust for battle.

He didn’t dare sit on the bed and get too close, lest Liu Qingge suddenly lurch up, full of life and vigor.

What would he do then? Sigh in relief? Admonish his shidi for being so careless? Hit him over the head with his fan?

It didn’t matter what he would do. There was nothing to be done.

Shen Qingqiu surveyed Liu Qingge one final time. He was defenseless. Unguarded. Strong body appearing suddenly frail and small, like a young boy pretending he was a man.

"Liu-shidi..." he whispered into the tense space between them. He longed to brush a strand of silky hair away from his ashen face, but refrained. "Who will protect you in your next life?"

His brow had lost its permanent furrow in sleep. Almost as if he had found peace and contentment in the afterlife, wherever it was.

Peace and contentment... It wasn't in Liu Qingge's nature. Maybe he'd be different the next time around; not so brash, so unfeeling. Not so determined to hide himself from the care of others and act like he could be alone forever.

Peace and contentment...

Could it be possible?

Shen Qingqiu hoped that, for him.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the last of everything :) Thank you so much for sticking around for all 30 chapters of this fic, I really appreciate it! I love reading every single comment and reaction you have and appreciated the motivation to keep me going :') This project was around 5 months in the making and exceeded all the expectations I had for myself regarding writing and creating. I'm personally amazed I made it this far where I could not only start a chaptered fic, but actually finish and post it as well.

And thank you again to J who beta read every chapter whether they liked it or not :) their comments and reactions helped me write a better Liushen fic that everyone could

enjoy. Thanks J!!!! <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!